

## Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 24, 2023

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September 24, 2023, 9:00 pm 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.

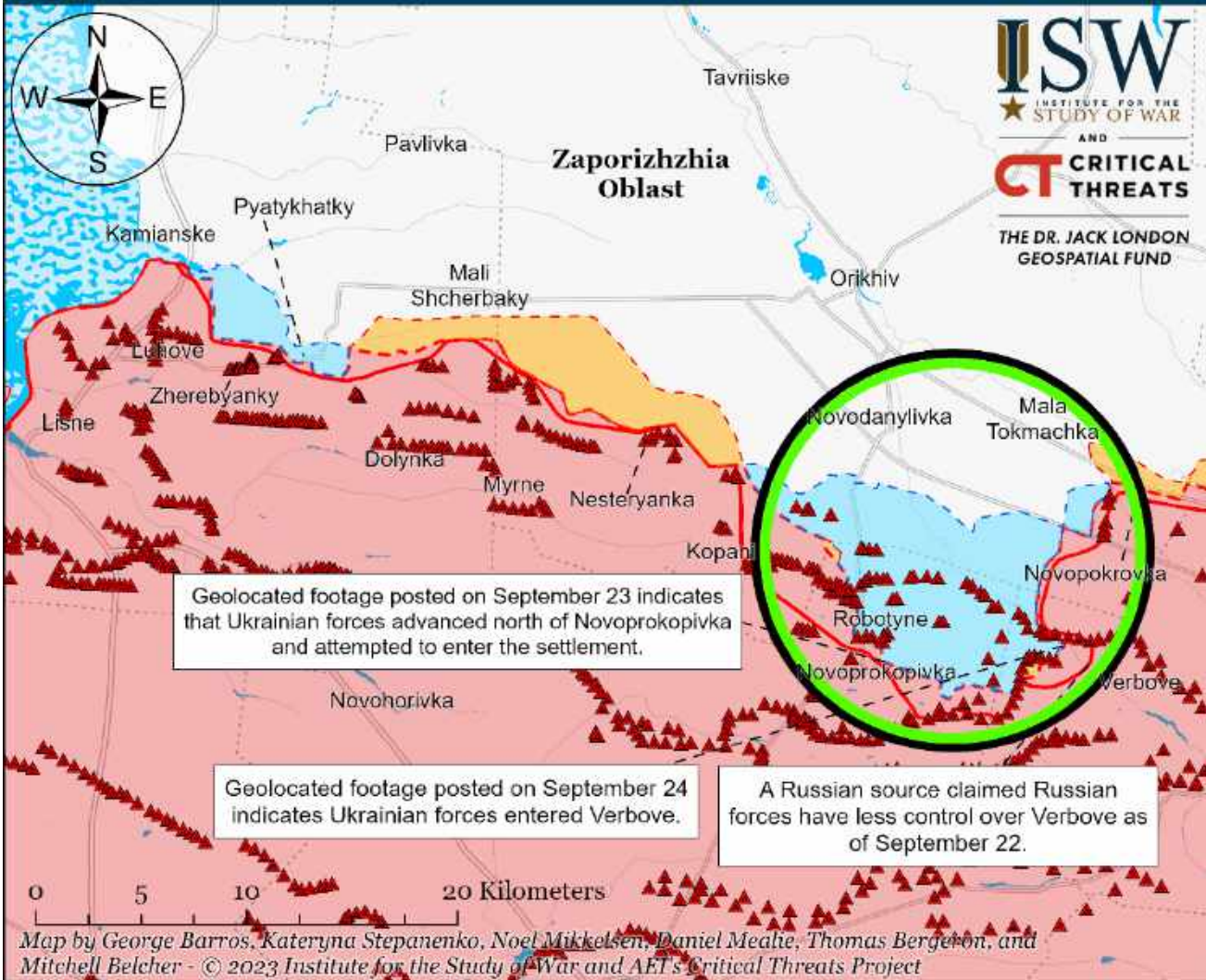
**Note:** The data cut-off for this product was 3pm ET on September 24. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 25 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

**ISW is providing an assessment of a very dynamic situation in the ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive near Orikhiv in western Zaporizhia Oblast. ISW emphasizes that the situation remains dynamic and unclear and that the tactical situation is likely changing rapidly. It is too early to forecast if Ukrainian forces will achieve an operational breakthrough in this sector of the front.**

**Elements of three Russian divisions are actively defending against Ukrainian assaults around the Ukrainian salient in the Orikhiv area in western Zaporizhia Oblast.** Elements of the Russian 42nd Motorized Rifle Division (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) are deployed and are defending at the southernmost point of the Ukrainian penetration and are engaging Ukrainian forces in Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv).[1] Elements of the Russian 76th Air Assault Division deployed to the Ukrainian salient's western flank near Kopani (11km southwest of Orikhiv) towards Robotyne (10m south of Orikhiv) and are counterattacking there.[2] Elements of the 7th Air Assault Division are deployed on the Ukrainian salient's eastern flank near the Verbove-Novopokrovka line and are counterattacking there.[3] Sources affiliated with the Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces report that the 56th Air Assault Regiment (7th Air Assault Division) is deployed about 5km north of Verbove near Novofedorivka.[4]

A Russian source claimed that the 7th and 76th VDV Divisions were ordered to conduct an operational encirclement of the Ukrainian salient, but that they failed to do so and that the 7th VDV Division's effectiveness significantly declined after a successful Ukrainian strike against the division headquarters on September 19.[5] ISW offers no assessment about these reported orders to encircle Ukrainian forces beyond noting that it would be a sound practice for Russian forces to conduct counterattacks against Ukrainian forces' flanks within limits.

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of September 24, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory	Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24	Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory	Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir
Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*	Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives	Russian Field Fortifications

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

Note: A Russian source claimed on September 22 that Ukrainian forces advanced within 800 meters of Novopokrovka. A Russian source claimed on September 24 that Ukrainian forces entered Verbove on September 22 and are holding half of the settlement as of September 24.

**Ukrainian forces are attacking along three directions within the Orikhiv salient as of September 24.** Ukrainian forces are conducting attacks from Robotyne against Novoprokopivka.[6] Ukrainian forces are attacking directly into Verbove's western side.[7] Ukrainian forces are also attacking north of Verbove.[8]

**Russian sources report that Ukrainian forces broke into Verbove on September 22 and continued attacking the settlement with armored vehicles as of September 24.**

Geolocated combat footage posted on September 24 shows a Ukrainian BMP operating within Verbove's westernmost village limits.[9] A VDV-affiliated source reported that Ukrainian forces entered Verbove for the first time on September 22 and continued pushing east.[10] The VDV source later reported that Ukrainian forces occupy half of Verbove as of September 24.[11] The VDV source accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of trying to conceal Ukraine's tactical progress in Verbove, rhetorically stating, "For how long can Shoigu's MoD hide the breakthrough in Verbove?"[12] Several Russian sources reported on September 24 that Ukrainian forces continue deploying vehicles against Verbove, including Bradley infantry fighting vehicles.[13] Some Russian sources are vehemently denying any Ukrainian breakthrough in Verbove as of September 24.[14] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces captured new unspecified locations near Verbove on September 24.[15]

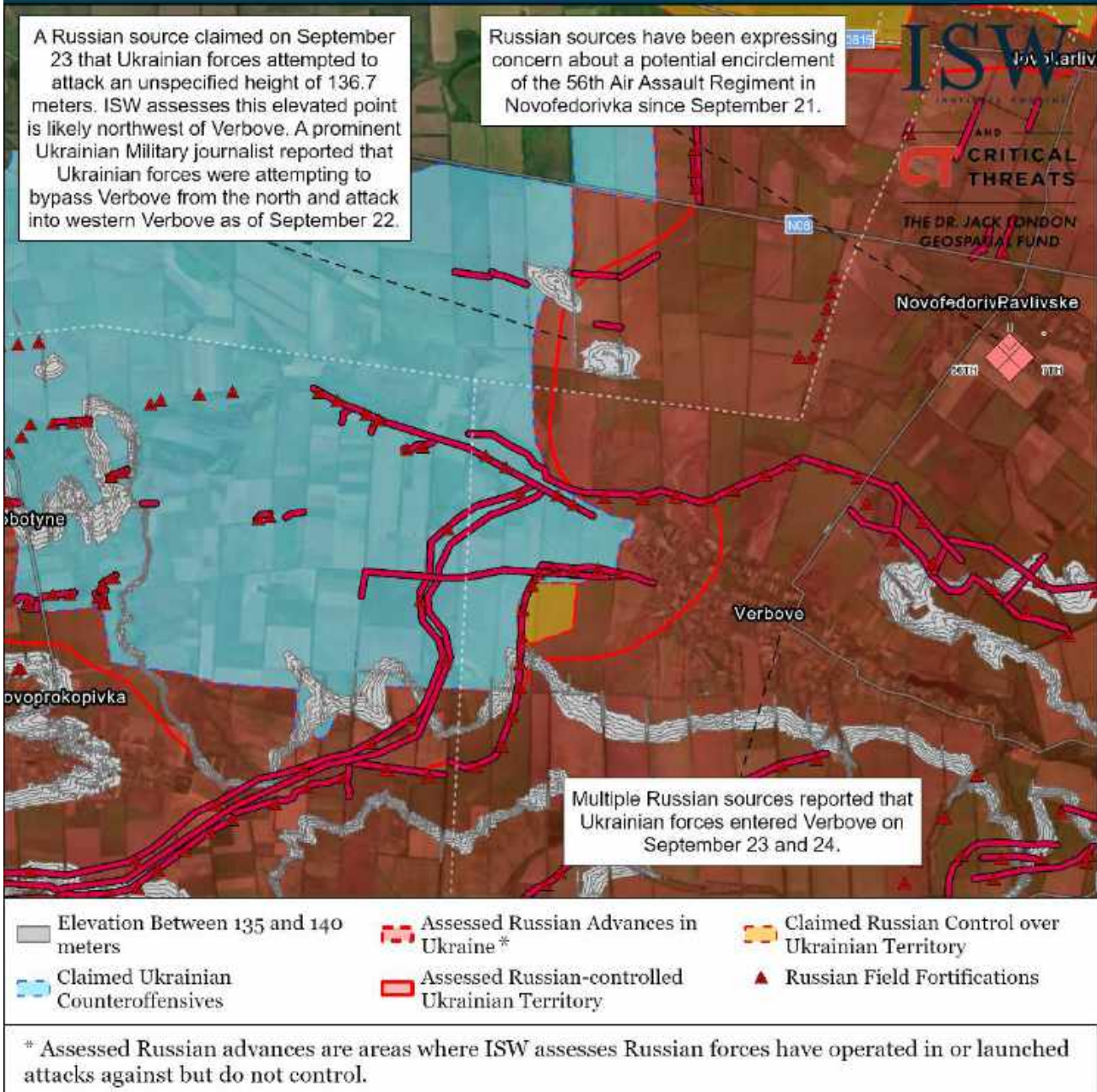
**Ukrainian forces are attacking north of Verbove and could isolate the 56th VDV Regiment deployed in Novofedorivka from its sister regiments in the Verbove area according to Russian sources.**

A Russian VDV source warned that there is a "real threat" of Ukrainian forces reaching the 56th VDV Regiment's rear near Novofedorivka on September 21.[16] The VDV source warned on September 22 that Ukrainian forces are within 7km of encircling the 56th VDV Regiment and that the regiment would be in a difficult position if its commander did not make a decision to withdraw from Novofedorivka to other previously prepared positions.[17] **ISW does not assess that an encirclement of the 56th VDV Regiment is likely, though Ukrainian forces may isolate it from the rest of the 7th VDV Division if Ukrainians manage to outmaneuver it from Verbove's north and the regiment inexplicably remains in its current positions.**

Ukrainian military journalist Konstyantyn Mashovets reported on September 22 that Ukrainian forces are attempting to bypass Verbove from the north.[18] A prominent Kremlin-linked milblogger reported on September 24 that Ukrainian forces improved their positions near Novofedorivka's flank.[19] Another prominent Russian milblogger reported on September 23 that Ukrainian forces attempted to attack an unspecified tactical height with an elevation of 136.7 meters near Verbove and that Ukrainian forces were deploying vehicles from the north to the south near Verbove.[20] ISW assesses that this tactical height of 136.7 meters is likely located approximately 3.5km northwest of Verbove based on an analysis of digital elevation data around Verbove. (It is customary in militaries to identify locations based on terrain elevations as marked on commonly used military maps, but ISW does not have access to the Russian maps to check for such markings.)



# Assessed Control of Terrain and Elevation around Verbove as of September 24, 2023



NASA FIRMS/VIIRS thermal anomaly data collected between September 22-24 shows an unusually intense cluster of heat anomalies north of Verbove. These anomalies, while not dispositive, are a supporting indicator of combat north of Verbove and support the Russian and Ukrainian reports of Ukrainian activity between Novofedorivka and Verbove.



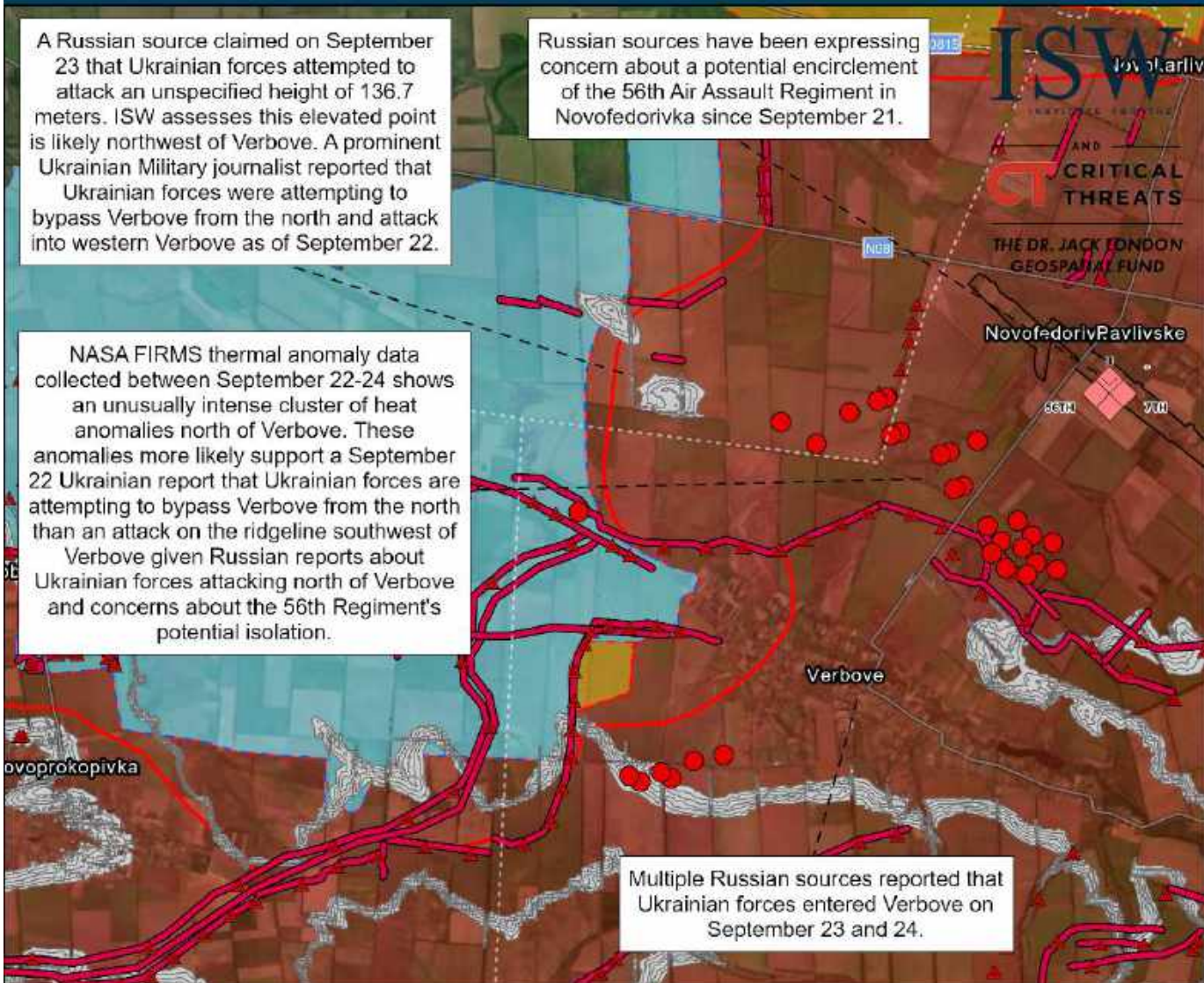
# Assessed Control of Terrain and Elevation around Verbove as of September 24, 2023

A Russian source claimed on September 23 that Ukrainian forces attempted to attack an unspecified height of 136.7 meters. ISW assesses this elevated point is likely northwest of Verbove. A prominent Ukrainian Military journalist reported that Ukrainian forces were attempting to bypass Verbove from the north and attack into western Verbove as of September 22.

Russian sources have been expressing concern about a potential encirclement of the 56th Air Assault Regiment in Novofedorivka since September 21.

NASA FIRMS thermal anomaly data collected between September 22-24 shows an unusually intense cluster of heat anomalies north of Verbove. These anomalies more likely support a September 22 Ukrainian report that Ukrainian forces are attempting to bypass Verbove from the north than an attack on the ridgeline southwest of Verbove given Russian reports about Ukrainian forces attacking north of Verbove and concerns about the 56th Regiment's potential isolation.

Multiple Russian sources reported that Ukrainian forces entered Verbove on September 23 and 24.



- |                                       |  |                                 |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|
| Elevation Between 135 and 140 meters  | Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory  | NASA FIRMS Thermal Anomaly Data |
| Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives   | Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory | Novofedorivka Limits            |
| Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine* | Russian Field Fortifications                     |                                 |

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

ISW cannot assess the extent of this Ukrainian attack north of Verbove and has not collected enough geospatial information to map it confidently at this time.

**A Russian source affiliated with the VDV expressed panic at the prospect of significant Ukrainian advances in the Verbove area.** A Russian milblogger, whose stated mission is to protect VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky from removal or arrest, warned on September 22 and 23 that the 56th VDV Regiment was under imminent threat of encirclement following the reported Ukrainian advance into Verbove.[21] The milblogger asserted that the commander of the 56th VDV Regiment was unable to make any decision about withdrawal and called on the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to allow Teplinsky to remedy the situation.[22] The milblogger noted high losses and poor morale among the 56th VDV Regiment and claimed that more than half of the personnel of the 7th and 76th VDV Divisions are mobilized personnel.[23] Other Russian sources, including those with close ties to the VDV, have not yet described the situation in Verbove or among VDV forces as this dire. **The Russian milblogger may be exaggerating the situation in the Verbove area to negatively portray the Russian military command and advocate for Teplinsky to have more control over tactical and operational decision-making.**

The milblogger compared the poor morale in the 56th VDV Regiment to the general morale of the Soviet military during its invasion of Afghanistan and of the Russian military during its campaign in Chechnya. This level of poor morale may have significant impacts on the Russian defense in the area as relatively elite VDV units appear responsible for conducting counterattacks, which require high morale.[24] It is less likely to affect the operations of units under direct attack, however, unless it reaches the point of causing surrenders, which is unlikely among VDV units even comprised of mobilized personnel.

**Russian forces continue to expend significant combat power on counterattacking to hold their current positions and appear to be resisting the operationally sound course of action of falling back to prepared defensive positions further south.** The Russian command constructed a multi-echeloned defense in southern Ukraine that would have allowed the Russian command to deploy defending Russian forces in depth throughout subsequent defensive layers. Russian forces have instead expended considerable amounts of manpower, materiel, and effort to hold the forwardmost defensive positions in southern Ukraine and have only withdrawn to subsequent defensive positions at the direct threat of Ukrainian advances.[25] Russian forces' elastic defense requires that one echelon of Russian forces slows a Ukrainian tactical advance while a second echelon of forces counterattacks to roll back that advance. Counterattacking requires significant morale and relatively high combat capabilities, and the Russian military appears to rely on relatively elite units and formations to counterattack, likely at the expense of these forces' degradation.[26]

Some Russian and Ukrainian sources have acknowledged that some Russian counterattacks in the wider Robotyne area have been senseless.[27] A defense in depth should afford these units respite from further degradation through withdrawal to a subsequent defensive layer. This withdrawal would allow the Russian command to conserve critical combat power for more operationally significant counterattacks and efforts to attrit attacking Ukrainian forces, although the task of conducting an orderly withdrawal under fire or pursuit is quite challenging and risky. American military analysts Michael Kofman and Rob Lee recently assessed that Russian forces have underutilized the depth of their defense and have yet to execute "a true defense in depth" in which Russian forces trade "space for attrition" and that the Russian command's decision to defend forward has allowed Ukrainian artillery units to attrit Russian forces.[28] ISW concurs with this assessment. ISW has observed a concerted Ukrainian effort to attrit Russian forces even as Ukrainian forces make significant tactical

gains, and the Russian resistance to withdrawing to defensive positions further south is likely compounding the asymmetric attrition gradient Ukrainian forces are trying to create. Russian counterattacks aimed at holding forward positions have been tactically significant, but it remains unclear if these counterattacks will have lasting operational importance.

**The Russian military command may be ordering these counterattacks to buy time, but it is unclear how the Kremlin intends to use time bought at such a price.** Russian forces appear to be unwilling to surrender tactical areas and are focusing instead on fighting for every meter instead of benefiting from the depth of their prepared defenses. Ukrainian military journalist Konstantyn Mashovets observed that the Russian military command is achieving its objective of buying more time from these counterattacks but questioned what the Russian military command intends to do with this time.[29] Mashovets argued that the sacrifice of combat-ready forces and assets during defensive operations only makes sense in two situations: if it allows time to organize defensive systems at another prepared line or if it buys time for the organization of a more substantial counterattack or counteroffensive. Mashovets added that both scenarios assume that Russia has additional reserves and the ability to rapidly deploy these reserves to a new defensive line or an operational direction where it plans to carry out a new offensive.[30] Mashovets concluded that regardless of the Russian intent behind buying time, the Russian military command still needs additional reinforcements in the western Zaporizhzhia direction in addition to forces already concentrated on this frontline for Russian forces' current counterattacks to be operationally sound.

**The Russian sacrifice of combat power to hold every meter may alternatively be intended to support the Kremlin's informational and hybrid warfare objectives.** Russian President Vladimir Putin first acknowledged the start of the Ukrainian counteroffensive on June 9 by emphasizing two key and persistent narratives: that Ukrainian forces will not achieve significant successes due to well-prepared Russian defenses and that the Ukrainian forces are suffering heavy losses in personnel and Western military equipment.[31] Putin and the Kremlin have been framing Russian defensive operations as a major battlefield victory, and persistent Russian counterattacks allow the Kremlin to claim these operations as individual victories amidst the general lack of Russian battlefield advances elsewhere. These efforts likely intend to erode support and trust in Ukrainian forces in Ukraine and the West. Putin may have ordered the Russian military command to hold all Russia's initial defensive positions to create the illusion that Ukrainian counteroffensives have not achieved any tactical or operational effects despite substantial Western support. This informational undertaking can only succeed in the long run if Russian forces can actually prevent Ukrainian forces from breaking through and liberating large areas, however.

**The Russian resistance to ceding ground may also be tied to Russian military commanders' and officials' attempts to use the counteroffensive to achieve political goals, or it could result from Putin's micromanagement.** A Kremlin insider source claimed that Putin reportedly gave Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu a deadline of one month until early October 2023 to improve the situation on the frontlines, stop Ukrainian counteroffensives, and have Russian forces regain the initiative to launch an offensive operation against a larger city.[32] The insider's claim, if true, may indicate that the Russian military command may be ordering relentless counterattacks in hopes of forcing the Ukrainian counteroffensive to culminate, even at a high cost to Russian military capabilities. ISW has previously observed instances in which the Russian MoD, fearing the imminent loss of Putin's favor, intensified its efforts to purge commanders who offered honest but negative views and advice and pursued unachievable military objectives at the expense of Russian forces.[33] The Russian MoD, for example, launched an unsuccessful and costly offensive on Vuhledar in February 2023 to undermine the domestic Russian informational effects of the Wagner Group's progress in Bakhmut and maintain favor with Putin.[34] Russian insider sources and

milbloggers who have advocated for Teplinsky claimed that Shoigu has been focusing on setting conditions to convince Putin to remove Teplinsky from command – which would likely be achievable if Shoigu is able to achieve Putin’s objectives during the counteroffensive.[35] One pro-Teplinsky channel even claimed that Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov had already removed Teplinsky from overseeing the defensive operation in southern Ukraine, although ISW cannot confirm the validity of this claim at this time.[36]

**Ukrainian forces may be able to achieve an operationally significant breakthrough in the southern frontline if several key assumptions hold.** A significant Ukrainian success will be more likely if:

- 1) Russian forces do not have the necessary reserves or combat power to maintain Russian defenses in western Zaporizhia Oblast;
- 2) Ukrainian forces retain enough combat power to continue pushing after exhausting Russian combat power; and
- 3) Russian defensive positions behind the current battle area are not as heavily mined or well prepared as the fortifications that Ukrainian forces have breached.

**This hypothesis is invalid if any of these assumptions are invalidated.** There are indicators that these assumptions remain valid as of this writing. ISW continues to assess that the Russian military does not have sufficient forces deployed to western Zaporizhia Oblast to completely man its defenses in depth and that Ukrainian forces should be able to operate through Russian field fortifications more rapidly if they are not properly manned.[37] Ukraine’s operations in Bakhmut have kept Russian forces committed to eastern Ukraine and away from the southern front and helped deny the creation of a strategic reserve.[38] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated on September 22 that the Russian military deployed its “reserve army” (the 25th Combined Arms Army [CAA]) “roughly north of Bakhmut” to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts in eastern Ukraine.[39] It remains unclear if Ukrainian forces have enough reserve forces and combat power to continue conducting offensive operations in the south until the Russian defenses break to effectively exploit an operational breakthrough. It also remains unclear how heavily mined or well prepared the Russian positions south of the current battle area are.

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive is in an extremely dynamic phase and ISW is not prepared to offer any confident forecast of events despite recent positive indicators.** Recent promising reports of Ukrainian tactical progress, including breaking through some Russian field fortifications, in the Orikhiv area should not be read as a guarantee that Ukraine is on the cusp of a significant operational success. Observers should be patient with Ukraine's campaign design and should expect Ukraine’s counteroffensive to continue through winter 2023 and into spring 2024. Ukraine does not need to achieve a sudden and dramatic deep penetration to achieve success.

#### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Elements of three Russian divisions are actively defending against Ukrainian assaults around the Ukrainian salient in the Orikhiv area in western Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian forces are attacking along three directions within the Orikhiv salient as of September 24.**



- **Russian sources report that Ukrainian forces broke into Verbove on September 22 and continued attacking the settlement with armored vehicles as of September 24.**
- **Ukrainian forces are attacking north of Verbove and could isolate the 56th VDV Regiment deployed in Novofedorivka from its sister regiments in the Verbove area according to Russian sources.**
- **Russian forces continue to expend significant combat power on counterattacking to hold their current positions and appear to be resisting the operationally sound course of action of falling back to prepared defensive positions further south.**
- **The Russian military command may be ordering these counterattacks to buy time, but it is unclear how the Kremlin intends to use time bought at such a price.**
- **The Russian sacrifice of combat power to hold every meter may alternatively be intended to support the Kremlin’s informational and hybrid warfare objectives.**
- **The Russian resistance to ceding ground may also be tied to Russian military commanders’ and officials’ attempts to use the counteroffensive to achieve political goals, or it could result from Putin’s micromanagement.**
- **Ukrainian forces may be able to achieve an operationally significant breakthrough in the southern frontline if several key assumptions hold.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 24.**

***We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 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

## **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

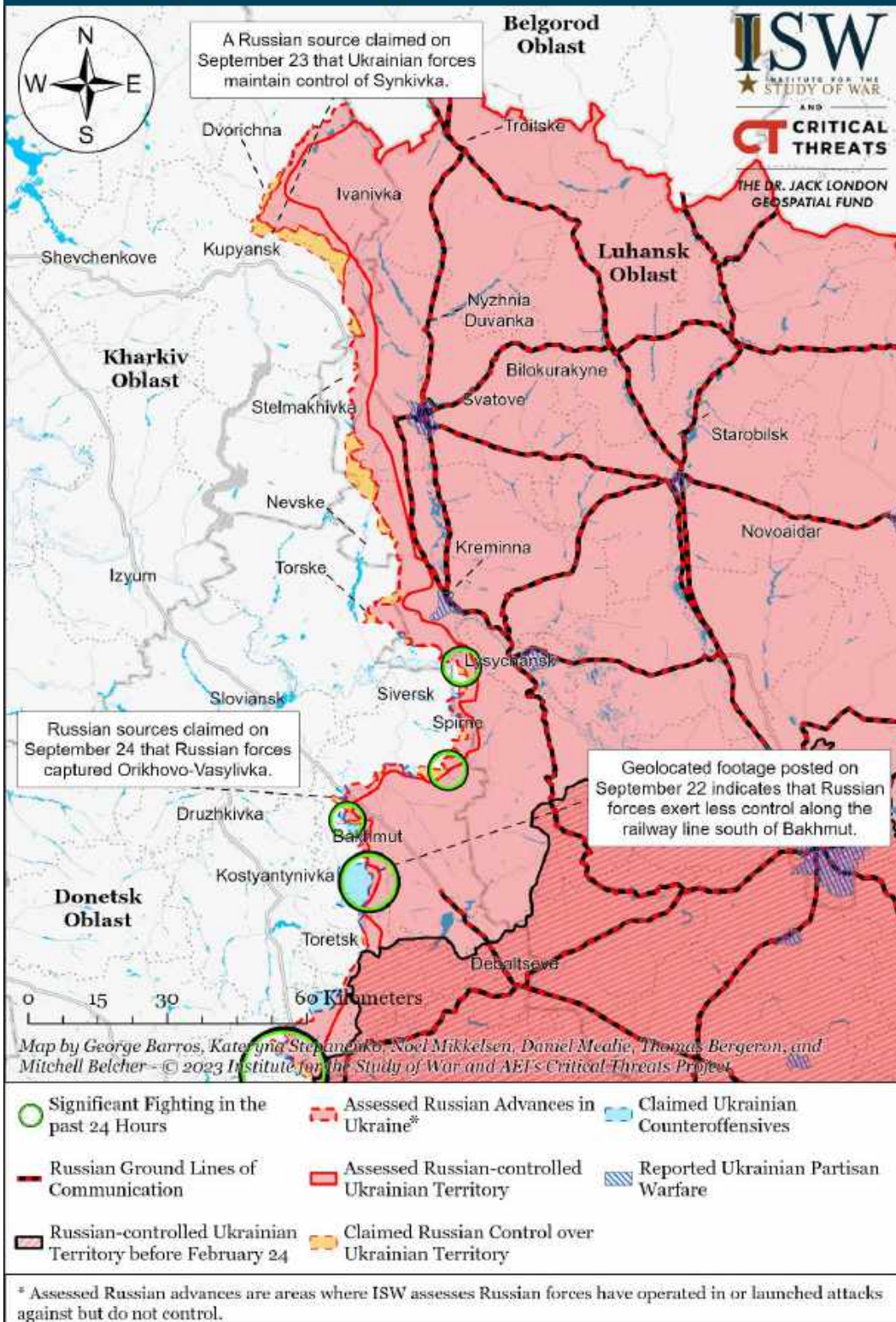
### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on September 24 but did not make any confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Bilohorivka, Donetsk Oblast (33km south of Kreminna).[40] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that Russian forces continue to transfer reserves to the Kupyansk and Lyman directions and noted that the Russian attack near Bilohorivka was the first Russian attack in these directions in “a long time.”[41] A

Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces achieved unspecified tactical success near Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) and Synkivka (9km northeast of Kupyansk) over the past week.[42] A Russian news aggregator claimed on September 23 that Russian forces are gradually taking control of Ukrainian positions near Synkivka and Petropavliwa and recaptured a number of Ukrainian positions near Novoyehorivka (26km southwest of Svatove).[43]

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted ground attacks near Kreminna on September 24 but did not make any confirmed advances. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces improved their positions near Novoyehorivka.[44] Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed on September 23 and 24 that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Torske (14km west of Kreminna) and the Serebryanske forest area (11km south of Kreminna).[45]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of September 24, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



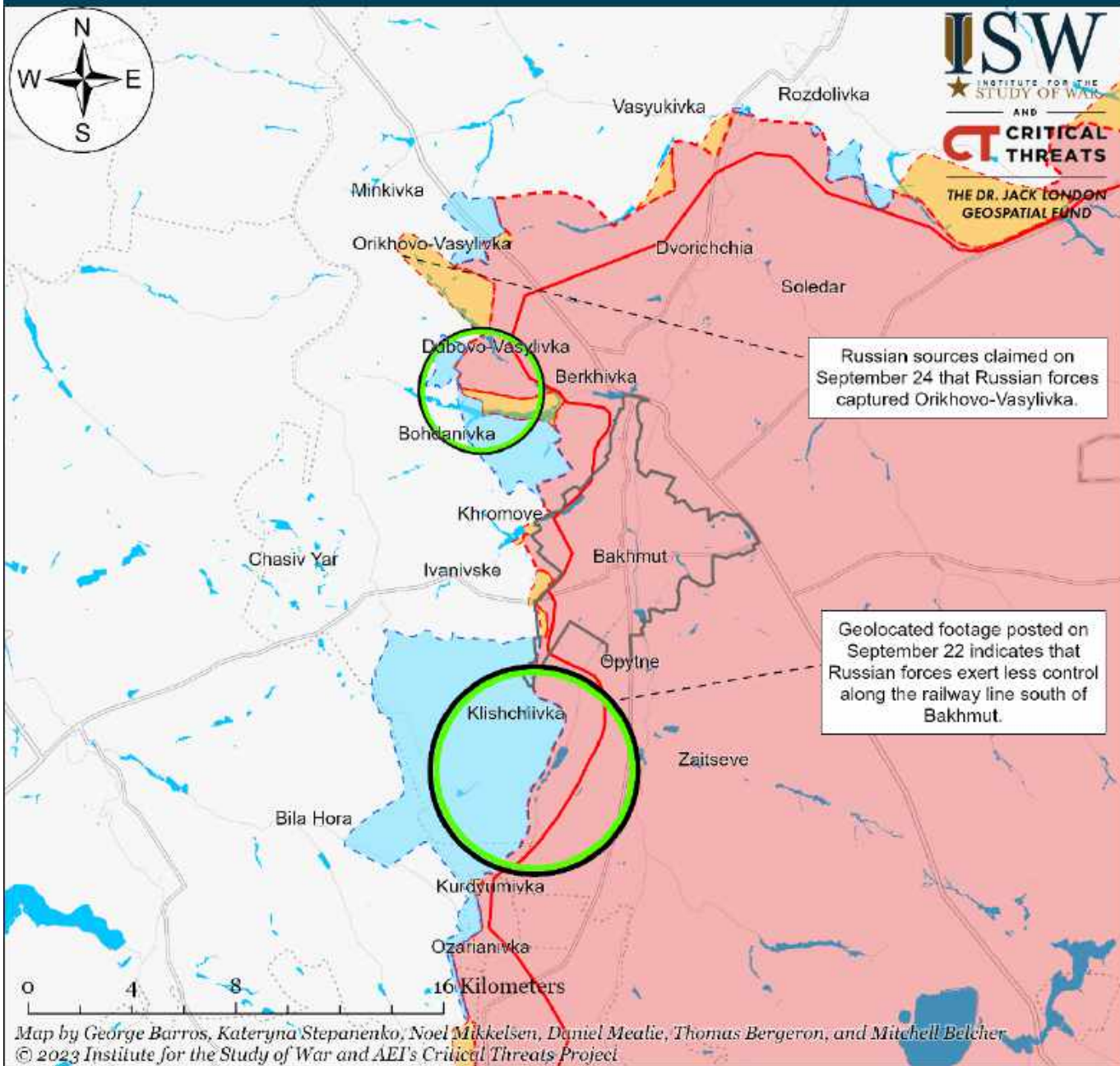


## **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)**

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on Bakhmut’s southern flank and reportedly forced Russian troops to retreat behind the railway line east of Klishchiivka (6km southwest of Bakhmut).[46] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing assaults south of Bakhmut, and Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash reiterated that Ukrainian positions are approximately three kilometers away from the Russian ground line of communication (GLOC) on the T0513 highway.[47]

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces captured Orikhovo-Vasylivka (10km northwest of Bakhmut) on September 24.[48] Russian sources claimed that elements of the Russian 106th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division seized Orikhovo-Vasylivka and that Russian forces are currently clearing the settlement, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these claims.[49] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger also noted that Russian forces carried out two simultaneous attacks from Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) towards Hryhorivka (10km northwest of Bakhmut) and towards Orikhovo-Vasylivka.[50] A Russian news aggregator claimed that Russian forces continued to attack Bakhmut’s northern flank on September 23 to push Ukrainian forces from heights near Orikhovo-Vasylivka and Berkhivka (5km northwest of Bakhmut).[51] Russian sources also claimed that Russian forces counterattacked near Kurdyumivka (12km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[52] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults east of Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut), southeast of Bila Hora (13km southeast of Bakhmut), and near Klishchiivka.[53]

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of September 24, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



Russian sources claimed on September 24 that Russian forces captured Orikhovo-Vasylivka.

Geolocated footage posted on September 22 indicates that Russian forces exert less control along the railway line south of Bakhmut.

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, and Mitchell Belcher © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Bakhmut City Limits
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

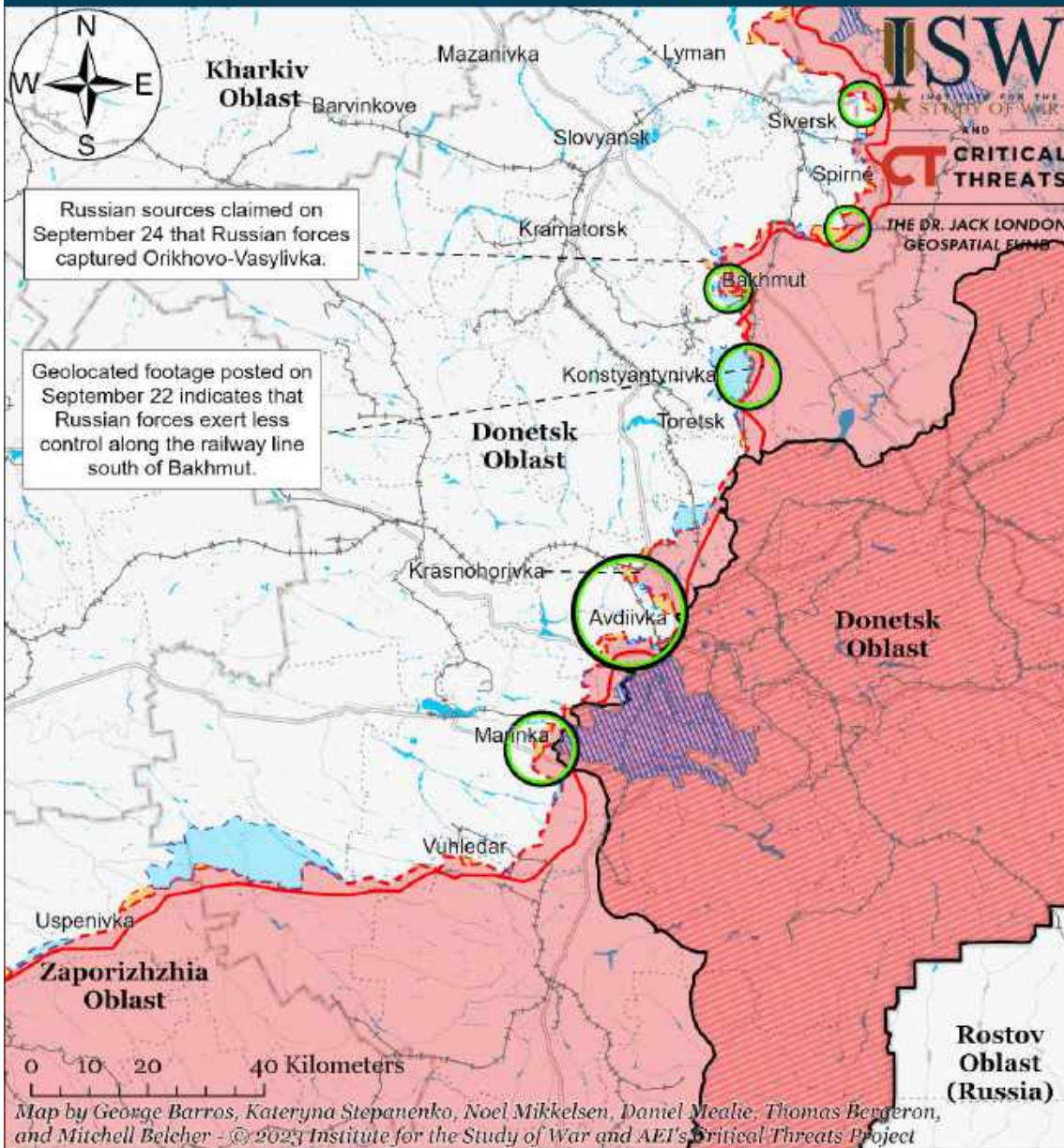
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

A Ukrainian serviceman stated that Russian forces concentrated reserves and artillery systems in the Bakhmut direction to stop Ukrainian advances in the area.<sup>[54]</sup> The serviceman stated that Russian forces have more manpower and artillery system in the Bakhmut direction than Ukrainian forces and noted that Russian counterattacks are hard to repel. This reported relatively high concentration of Russian manpower and equipment in the Bakhmut area suggests that the Ukrainian counteroffensive operations are continuing to draw and fix a significant contingent of Russian forces in the Bakhmut direction, which is their stated purpose.<sup>[55]</sup>

Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Donetsk City-Avdiivka line on September 24, but did not advance. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces attempted to restore lost positions in the Avdiivka area and conducted unsuccessful offensive operations near Marinka (just west of Donetsk City) and Pobieda (5km southwest of Donetsk City).<sup>[56]</sup> A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked on the southern approaches to Avdiivka and conducted assaults near Marinka and Krasnohorivka (6km west of Donetsk City).<sup>[57]</sup>



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of September 24, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- + Major Railroads
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

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

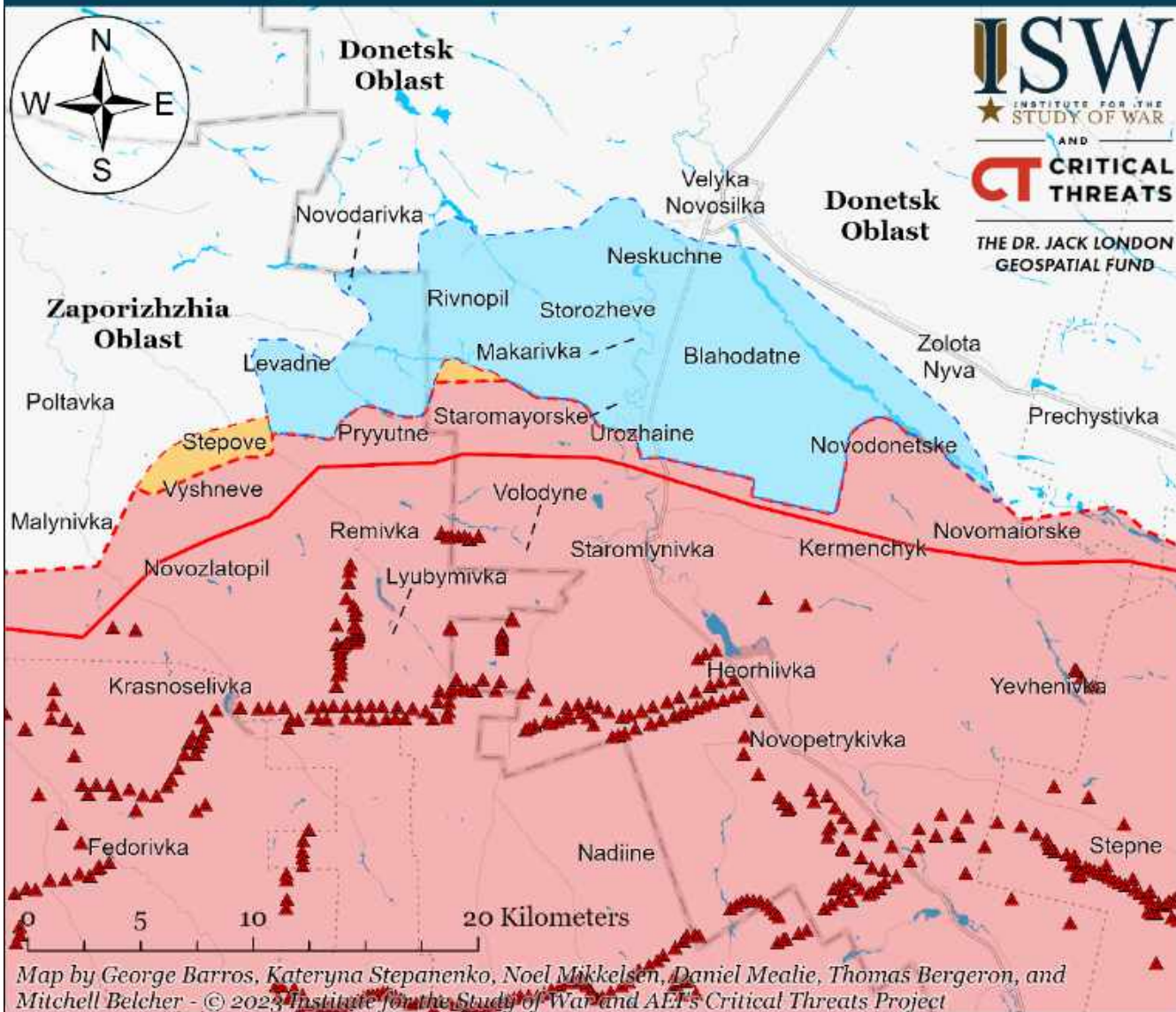
A Russian news aggregator claimed on the evening of September 23 that Russian forces attacked near Mykilske (4km southeast of Vuhledar).<sup>[58]</sup>

Russian sources claimed on September 24 that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful limited attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area over the past week. A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that small Ukrainian infantry groups occasionally conducted unsuccessful assaults on Russian positions in this area.<sup>[59]</sup> Another Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces recently retreated after conducting unsuccessful attacks along the Novodonetske-Novomayorske (12-18km southeast of Velyka Novosilka) line in the past week.<sup>[60]</sup>

Russian forces reportedly used a lull in fighting to repair Russian defenses in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on September 24. The Russian “Vostok” Battalion, operating in the area, claimed that Russian forces used a break in Ukrainian attacks to repair Russian defenses, particularly Russian minefields.<sup>[61]</sup> The “Vostok” Battalion claimed that the Russian defense in the area was “overloaded” during the fighting and that Russian forces now devote every day without fighting to reconstitution.<sup>[62]</sup>



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around the Vremivka Salient as of September 24, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- ▲ Russian Field Fortifications
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

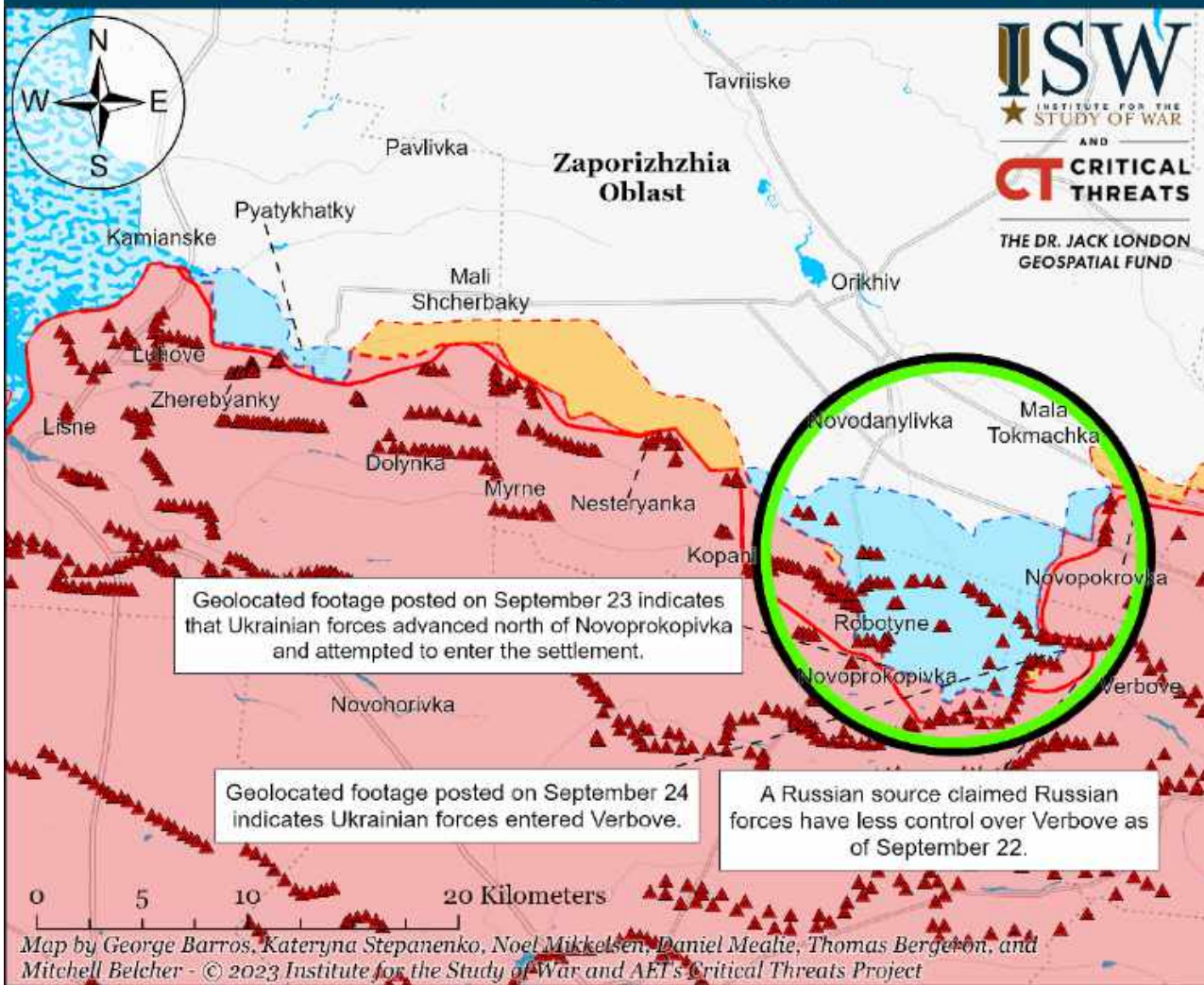
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.



Ukrainian forces continued attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 24 and advanced into Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv). Geolocated combat footage published on September 24 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced to Verbove's western outskirts.[63] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced near Verbove, approached the outskirts of Novoprokopivka (16km south of Orikhiv), and improved their positions near Novofedorivka's (21km southeast of Orikhiv) flank.[64] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces continued to advance towards Verbove and Novoprokopivka over the past week.[65] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian Forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction, pushed Russian forces from their positions near Verbove, and consolidated newly secured positions.[66] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued assaults near Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), Verbove, and Novoprokopivka.[67] Most Russian sources continued to claim on September 23 and 24 that Ukrainian forces have not broken through the Russian defense along the Robotyne-Verbove (10km south to 18km southeast of Orikhiv) line and that Russian forces retain control over Verbove.[68] A Russian milblogger claimed on September 24 that elements of the Russian 291st Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) repelled a Ukrainian attack near Robotyne.[69]

Russian sources continued ground attacks in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 24 but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Robotyne.[70] A Russian milblogger also claimed that Russian forces attacked the western outskirts of the settlement but did not specify an outcome.[71] Another Russian milblogger posted footage claiming to show elements of the Russian 108th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Regiment (7th Guards VDV Division) operating along the Robotyne-Verbove line.[72]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of September 24, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory	Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24	Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory	Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir
Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*	Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives	Russian Field Fortifications

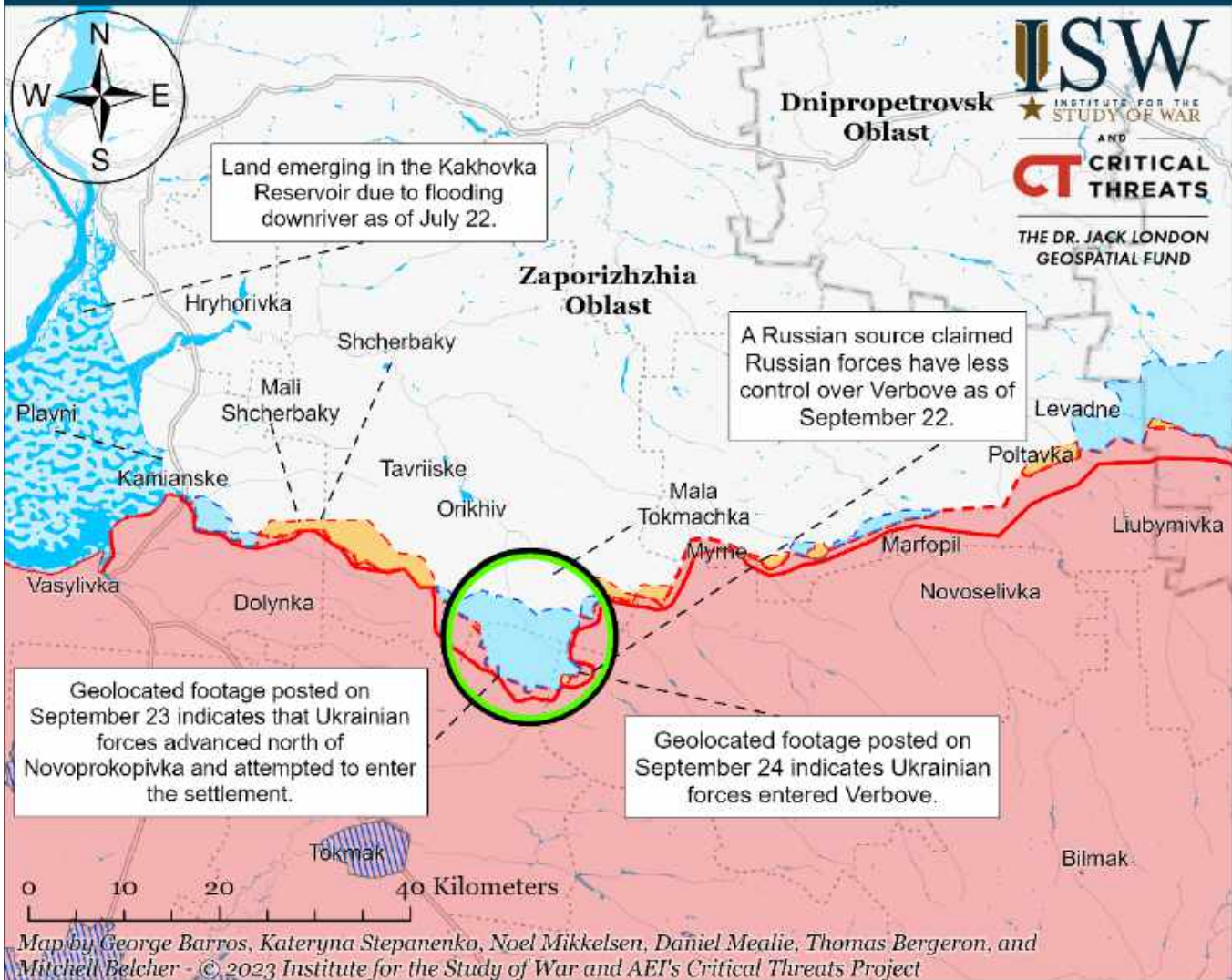
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on September 22 that Ukrainian forces advanced within 800 meters of Novopokropivka. A Russian source claimed on September 24 that Ukrainian forces entered Verbove on September 22 and are holding half of the settlement as of September 24.

Russian sources claimed that three Ukrainian HIMARS missiles struck Tokmak in occupied Zaporizhzhia Oblast on September 24.[73]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of September 24, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours                 | Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory  | Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare     |
| Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24 | Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory | Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir |
| Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*                     | Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives              |   |

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

Note: A Russian source claimed on September 22 that Ukrainian forces advanced within 800 meters of Novoprokopivka. A Russian source claimed on September 24 that Ukrainian forces entered Verbove on September 22 and are holding half of the settlement as of September 24.



Russian sources continued to express concern over recent Ukrainian activity in the Dnipro River delta and on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on September 24, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these claims. A Russian milblogger claimed on September 24 that Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions on islands in the Dnipro River delta.<sup>[74]</sup> The milblogger also claimed that Ukrainian forces have created a “bridgehead” near Oleshky (7km southeast of Kherson City) and expanded their positions near Pidstepne (19km east of Kherson City) on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast in the past week.<sup>[75]</sup> Another Russian milblogger claimed on September 24 that Ukrainian forces expanded their positions on the southwestern part of Kozatskyi Island (northwest of Nova Kakhovka).<sup>[76]</sup> Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on September 24 that Russian forces have recently intensified aviation activity in the Kherson direction and conducted more than 20 strikes near Kherson City and Beryslav (64km northeast of Kherson City) over the last day.<sup>[77]</sup> The recent intensification of Russian air strikes in the area indicates that Russian military command may share the milbloggers’ concerns about limited Ukrainian activity along the Dnipro River.

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 24, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



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

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed on September 24 that Russian border guards repelled a Ukrainian attempt to land forces on Cape Tarkhankut (115 km northwest of Sevastopol) in occupied Crimea on the night of September 22 to 23 and another attempt on the night of September 23 to 34.[78]

Russian forces reportedly conducted a strike on Snake Island on September 24. Humenyuk and Ukrainian Operational Command South reported that Russian forces targeted Snake Island with four guided aerial bombs to prevent the development of the Ukrainian temporary corridor for civilian merchant vessels through the Black Sea.[79] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces struck Snake Island with two bombs and insinuated that Ukrainian forces used the island as a logistics base for the sabotage and reconnaissance groups that attempted to land on Crimea.[80]

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

Former Wagner personnel may become instructors for irregular people's militias and territorial defense units in Rostov Oblast. Chairman of the Rostov Oblast combat veterans "Oplot" organization Valery Bova stated on September 24 that an unspecified number of former Wagner personnel will arrive in Rostov Oblast to train volunteers in Rostov Oblast people's militias and territorial defense units.[81] Bova stated that former Wagner personnel will receive funds from "Oplot" founders and that these volunteer formations will not receive arms until they receive permission from relevant Russian law enforcement agencies.[82] Seventy people have reportedly submitted applications to join "Oplot's" territorial defense reserve since August, and "Oplot" reportedly plans to train 300 personnel within six months.[83] Wagner fighters have previously trained analogous people's militias in Kursk and Belgorod oblasts starting in winter 2022-2023.[84]

### **Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

Russian occupation administrations in Ukraine officially elected acting occupation heads to their posts on September 23 following illegal regional elections. Occupation legislative assemblies elected acting Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo, acting Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky, acting Luhansk Oblast occupation head Leonid Pasechnik, and acting Donetsk Oblast occupation head Denis Pushilin as official heads of their respective occupation administrations.[85] Russian occupation officials used coercive efforts during regional elections in occupied Ukraine, and the Kremlin likely predetermined these electoral results.[86]

Pushilin reportedly signed a decree on September 18 that will regulate the movement of occupation employees under martial law, likely setting conditions for future Russian evacuation efforts.[87] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia personnel and civilian employees of the Donetsk Oblast occupation administration will have to submit planned travel to their managers no later than a month ahead of time.[88] The decree likely aims to allow Russian occupation administrations to decide when to allow occupation officials to evacuate and to discourage mass movement out of occupied territories.

Pushilin also signed a decree on September 18 banning large gatherings in occupied Donetsk Oblast.[89] The decree will forbid weekday gatherings on streets or in other public places between 2300 and 0400.[90] The decree likely aims to allow Russian occupation authorities to conduct mass crackdowns in the event of public resistance to Russian occupation.

## **Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

Russian and Belarusian forces extended joint exercises through October 1. The Belarusian *Hajun Project* reported that joint exercises at the Borisov Combined Arms Training Ground in Minsk Oblast, the Brest Training Ground in Brest Oblast, and the Lepelsky Training Ground in Vitebsk Oblast will last until September 30.<sup>[91]</sup> Joint training exercises at the training ground of the Belarusian 6th Mechanized Brigade and the Neman Aviation Training Grounds in Grodno Oblast will reportedly last until September 29 and exercises at the Domanovo Training Ground of the Air Force and Air Defense Forces and the Obuz-Lesnovsky Combined Arms Training Ground in Brest Oblast will reportedly last until October 1.<sup>[92]</sup>

**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.**

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# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 23, 2023

George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Christina Harward,  
Nicole Wolkov, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 23, 2023, 8:30pm 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.

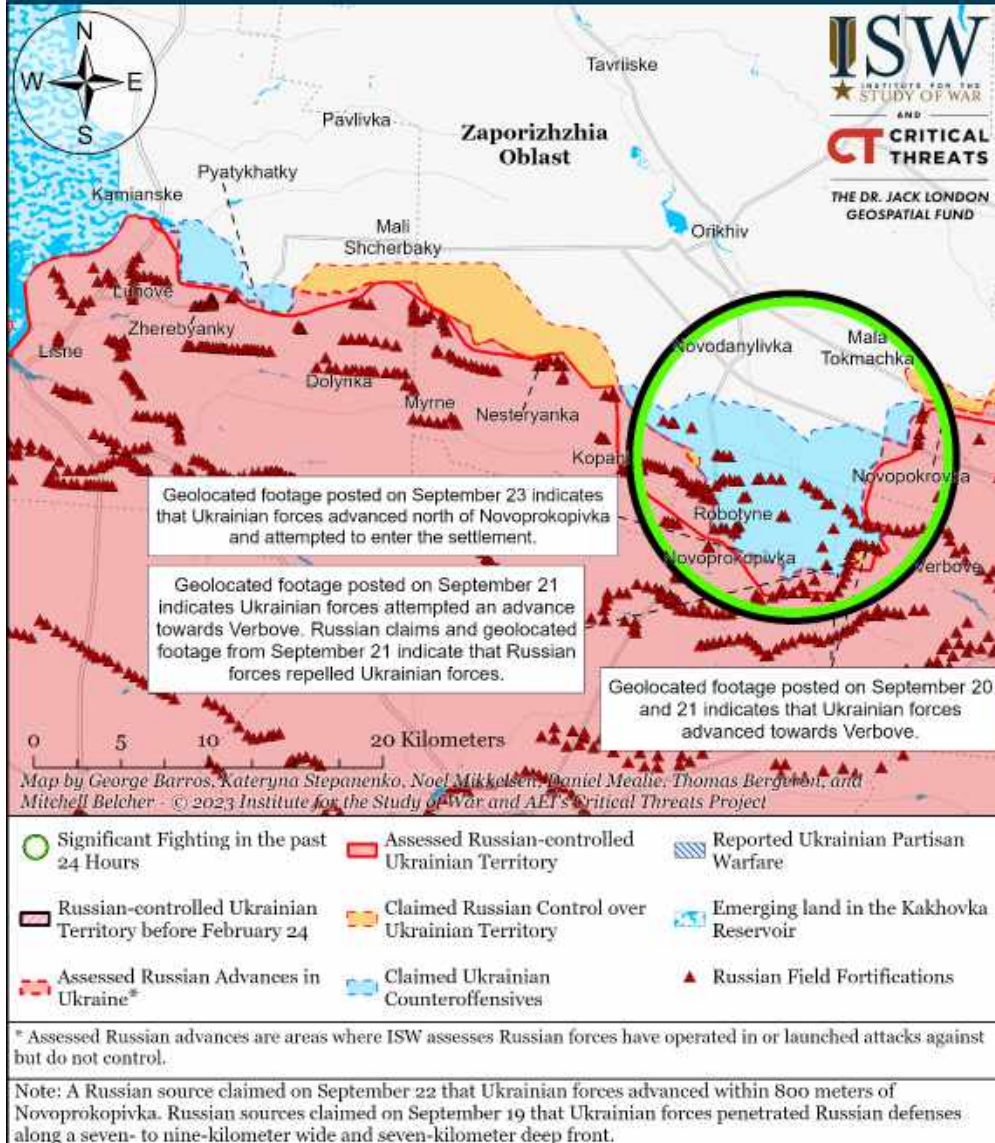
Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

**Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3pm ET on September 23. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 24 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.**

**ISW is now prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have broken through Russian field fortifications west of Verbove in western Zaporizhia Oblast.** These fortifications are not the final defensive line in Russia's defense in depth in western Zaporizhia Oblast, but rather a specific series of the best-prepared field fortifications arrayed as part of a near-contiguous belt of an anti-vehicle ditch, dragon's teeth, and fighting positions about 1.7 - 3.5 km west of Verbove.[1]

Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskiy stated in an interview with *CNN* published on September 23 that Ukrainian forces achieved a "breakthrough" on the left flank near Verbove and that Ukrainian forces continue advancing.[2] Combat footage posted on September 22 shows a destroyed Ukrainian Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) and BMP-2 operating slightly beyond Russia's fighting positions trench line near Verbove, indicating continued Ukrainian progress in deploying more heavy equipment beyond Russia's triune belt of the anti-vehicle ditch, dragon's teeth, and fighting positions.[3] Commercially available satellite imagery indicates that Ukrainian forces have brought heavy equipment closer to Verbove over the past 96 hours in a manner consistent with Tarnavskiy's statement.[4] *The Wall Street Journal* reported on September 21 that Ukrainian forces achieved a "limited breakthrough" west of Verbove citing an unnamed Ukrainian Air Assault Forces officer.[5]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of September 23, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



**Ukrainian forces have not overcome all of the prepared Russian defensive positions near Verbove.** Ukrainian forces' rate of advance near their breakthrough remains unclear. Russian forces likely still control segments of the long trench line of Russian fighting positions between Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) and Verbove, especially near the tactical high ground to the south. Russian forces have reportedly established prepared fighting positions in almost every tree line that Ukrainian infantry are slowly and systematically fighting through. Russian forces have more field fortifications beyond Verbove; there are more anti-vehicle trenches and fighting positions north of Ocheretuvate (26km southeast of Orikhiv), for example. It is unclear the extent to which those positions are manned, however. ISW continues to assess that the Russian military does not have sufficient forces deployed to this sector of the front to completely man its defenses in depth and that

Ukrainian forces should be able to operate through Russian field fortifications more rapidly if they are not properly manned.[6]

**Ukrainian forces are deepening their penetration in Zaporizhia Oblast and are assaulting Novoprokopivka – a frontline village 1.5 km immediately south of Robotyne.** Geolocated combat footage posted on September 23 shows elements of the Russian 70th Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) ambushing and killing two Ukrainian infantrymen in Novoprokopivka’s northeastern outskirts, indicating that Ukrainian forces have likely cleared Russian positions between Robotyne and Novoprokopivka.[7] Multiple Russian sources reported that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian attack against northern Novoprokopivka on September 22.[8] This is the first confirmed Ukrainian ground attack in the immediate vicinity of Novoprokopivka.

**Ukrainian military officials stated that the Ukrainian counteroffensive would continue in the winter.** Tarnavskiy told *CNN* that he expected a major Ukrainian breakthrough after Ukrainian forces reach Tokmak (a major Russian stronghold in western Zaporizhia) and that it is important that Ukrainian forces not lose the initiative they currently hold.[9] Tarnavskiy also stated that Ukrainian operations will continue through the winter as Ukrainian forces are mostly advancing on foot without vehicles and that inclement weather will thus not have a major negative effect on the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[10] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov echoed a similar assessment about continued Ukrainian winter operations in an interview with *The War Zone* published on September 22.[11] ISW has previously assessed that, while seasonal weather can slow ground movements and challenge logistics, it will not impose a definite end to Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[12] The culmination of the Ukrainian counteroffensive will likely depend rather on the Russian and Ukrainian balance of forces as well as on Western aid to Ukraine.

**The Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast has likely destroyed the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet).** Budanov stated in his interview with *The War Zone* published on September 22 that the 810th Brigade was “completely defeated” in southern Ukraine.[13] Budanov stated that the 810th Brigade has withdrawn and that Russian airborne (VDV) units replaced them on the front. Budanov’s description of the status of the 810th Brigade corresponds most closely to the US military’s doctrinal definition of the tactical mission task of “destroy”: “physically render[ing] an enemy force combat-ineffective until reconstituted.”[14] Elements of the 810th Brigade have reportedly been operating in the Zaporizhia direction since March 2023 and in western Zaporizhia Oblast since June 2023.[15] ISW previously observed the 810th Brigade in October 2022, when it was reportedly operating in Kherson Oblast, and the unit was likely reconstituting in the rear in the interim before assuming positions in Zaporizhia Oblast.[16] The 810th Brigade has repeatedly suffered significant losses, and Ukrainian forces have destroyed the unit in the past, following which the Russian military has reconstituted it. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on April 19, 2022, that the 158 soldiers of the 810th Brigade had been killed and about 500 wounded.[17] GUR Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskiy stated on July 31, 2022, that 200 servicemen of the 810th Brigade refused to return to the war in Ukraine, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported on September 12, 2022, that the 810th Brigade lost more than 85% of its personnel in the Kherson direction and that many again refused to return to combat.[18]

**A senior Ukrainian official explicitly confirmed that Ukraine’s objective in Bakhmut is to fix Russian forces. Ukraine’s fixing of Russian forces in Bakhmut may be alleviating pressure on the Kupyansk frontline.** Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated that Ukrainian forces achieved their objective of pinning Russian forces in Bakhmut and preventing their transfer to other areas of the theater – such as southern Ukraine – in a September 22 interview.[19] Budanov also stated that the Russian military deployed the recently created and not fully formed 25th Combined Arms Army (CAA) of the Eastern Military District “roughly north of Bakhmut.”[20] Budanov previously reported on August 31 that the Russian military deployed elements of the 25th CAA to replace elements of the 41st CAA (Central Military District) in the Kupyansk direction as elements of the 41st CAA began a “slow” redeployment to southern Ukraine.[21] The Russian deployment of elements of the 25th CAA to Bakhmut instead of Kupyansk will likely disrupt Russian efforts to fix Ukrainian forces in the Kupyansk direction, as Russian forces need these troops to continue assaults in place of the 41st CAA. Ukrainian officials and Russian sources have indicated that the tempo and the intensity of Russian offensives on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line has significantly decreased in recent weeks as Russian forces are continuing to regroup and rotate personnel in this direction, and the redirection of the deployment of 25th CAA may have alleviated some of the pressure from this frontline.[22] Budanov’s statement supports ISW’s recent assessment that Ukrainian counteroffensive operations on Bakhmut’s southern flank have fixed a large amount of Russian combat power in Bakhmut that would otherwise be available to reinforce Russian defenses in the south – or, in this case, to attempt to force Ukrainian forces to redeploy to defend against Russian assaults around Kupyansk.[23]

**Ukraine’s simultaneous counteroffensives in Bakhmut and southern Ukraine are impeding Russia’s long-term force generation efforts as Russia redeploys its new reserves to defend against Ukrainian advances.** Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) formed a “reserve army” at the end of June, likely referencing the 25th CAA among other formations, which began recruiting personnel from the Russian Far East in mid-May.[24] The formation of the 25th CAA was likely part of Shoigu’s announced intent to conduct large-scale force restructuring by 2026, and the use of these forces in combat and defensive operations will likely expend reserves intended for the long-term reconstitution and expansion of Russia’s military.[25] The Russian military command has also likely been unable to fully staff or properly train the 25th CAA at this time. Budanov specified that the unfinished 25th CAA has about 15,000 troops, whereas the Russian military had reportedly hoped to recruit 30,000 contract personnel for the 25th CAA.[26] Ukrainian military officials assessed that the 25th CAA would not be combat effective until at least 2024.[27] Russia had previously attempted to form the 3rd Army Corps over the summer of 2022 as a reserve force but had deployed and expended much of this ill-prepared formation defending against Ukrainian counteroffensives in the fall of 2022.[28]

**A Ukrainian intelligence chief stated that the September 22 Ukrainian strike on the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Command headquarters in Sevastopol injured senior Russian commanders.** Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov told *Voice of America (VOA)* in an interview published on September 23 that the Ukrainian strike on the BSF Command headquarters wounded the commander of the Russian grouping of forces in the Zaporizhia direction, Colonel General Alexander Romanchuk, who is in “very serious condition” and the commander of the 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (Northern Fleet), Lieutenant General Oleg Tsekov, who is “unconscious.”[29] Budanov also reported that the



strike killed at least nine and injured 16 Russian personnel.[30] VOA reported that the GUR has no information about the alleged death of BSF commander Admiral Viktor Sokolov.[31] Ukrainian Special Operations Forces reported that Ukrainian forces “precisely” struck the BSF Command headquarters during a meeting of senior BSF leadership.[32] Satellite imagery published on September 22 showing the BSF Command headquarters before and after the strike indicates that Ukrainian forces conducted a precision strike.[33]



Imagery of the strike against the Black Sea Fleet Headquarters. September 23, 2023.

Imagery courtesy of Planet Labs PBC.

**Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 22 to 23.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces destroyed 14 of 15 Shahed-131/136 drones and that Russian forces launched four missiles.[34] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted a missile attack on Kremenchuk, Poltava Oblast.[35] Several Russian sources claimed that the Russian forces conducted a retaliatory strike on Kremenchuk airfield after the Ukrainian strike on the BSF Command headquarters.[36]

**Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky appointed former Roscosmos (Russian space agency) head and ultranationalist figure Dmitry Rogozin as a Russian Federation Council senator representing occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[37]** Rogozin is affiliated with the “Tsarskiye Volky” (Tsar’s Wolves) volunteer battalion but has not held a position in the Russian government since his dismissal as head of Roskosmos in July 2022.[38] A Russian insider source claimed that Rogozin has ties to the “Convoy” private military company (PMC) and advocated for its use in Africa and Nagorno-Karabakh to Russian Presidential Administration Head Anton Vaino.[39] ISW previously reported that Crimean occupation head Sergey Aksyonov formed a “Convoy” with Wagner-affiliated Konstantin Pikalov.[40] The insider source claimed that unspecified Russian officials forced Rogozin to go on a “business trip (exile)” to defense industrial base enterprises in Belarus after multiple meetings with Vaino.[41] Rogozin’s appointment as occupied Zaporizhia Oblast Federation Council senator may be indicative of his ties to Russian occupation officials and his attempts to secure a new position in the Russian government.

**A Russian insider source argued that the Russian military should reintroduce military officers for political affairs (*zampolits*) to address the Russian military’s problems with political and ideological commitment — a problem that Russian military thinkers identified in September 2018.** The insider source claimed that GRU political officers are using an outdated “Soviet template” to conduct information operations against the enemy and are failing to provide political support to Russian military personnel.[42] The insider source noted that Russian political officers must resolve the contradictions between senior Russian political leaders’ slogans and reality to ensure that military personnel can distinguish between possible and impossible objectives. The insider source claimed that Russian military-political work encourages blind repetition of phrases and orders, which prevents Russian military personnel from understanding and communicating Russian political decisions to their subordinates or explaining contradictions in political leadership messaging. Chairman of the Russian State Duma Defense Committee Colonel General Andrey Kartapolov identified similar issues in his September 2018 essay justifying the creation of the Russian Military-Political Directorate.[43] Kartapolov stated that Russian military-political leadership should adapt Soviet structures to new content. Kartapolov also argued that Russia must ensure the “information protection” of military personnel and create a stable conviction in both the military and broader society about why they must serve Russia. This insider’s argument suggests that the Russian military has not solved the problem that Kartapolov identified over the past five years.

**Disjointed Wagner Group contingents reportedly returning to fight in Ukraine are likely to have a marginal impact on Russian combat capabilities without bringing the full suite of effectiveness Wagner had had as a unitary organization under financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin’s and founder Dmitry Utkin’s leadership.** Former Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated on September 23 that Wagner personnel are operating in Luhansk Oblast and across different sectors of the frontline.[44] Haidai also stated that he did not know the number of Wagner personnel or the organization under which these Wagner personnel are

operating in Ukraine.[45] A Wagner-affiliated source claimed that about 500 Wagner personnel including those who refused to participate in the Wagner rebellion on June 24 have joined a new unspecified organization organized by the former Wagner personnel department head and will likely return to Ukraine to fight on the southern flank of Bakhmut.[46] ISW previously observed reports that the Wagner personnel department head (previously referred to as Vadim V. “Khrustal”) is attempting to recruit Wagner fighters for a new PMC for operations in Africa.[47] These reports indicate that Wagner forces are fragmented and are unlikely to organize into a cohesive fighting force or have an impact on Russian combat capabilities if they return to fighting in Ukraine.

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **ISW is now prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have broken through Russian field fortifications west of Verbove in western Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian forces have not overcome all prepared Russian defensive positions near Verbove.**
- **Ukrainian forces are deepening their penetration in Zaporizhia Oblast and are assaulting Novoprokopivka – a frontline village 1.5 km immediately south of Robotyne.**
- **Ukrainian military officials stated that the Ukrainian counteroffensive would continue in the winter.**
- **The Ukrainian counteroffensive in western Zaporizhia Oblast has likely destroyed the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet).**
- **A senior Ukrainian official explicitly confirmed that Ukraine’s objective in Bakhmut is to fix Russian forces. Ukraine’s fixing of Russian forces in Bakhmut may be alleviating pressure on the Kupyansk frontline.**
- **Ukraine’s simultaneous counteroffensives in Bakhmut and southern Ukraine are impeding Russia’s long-term force generation efforts as Russia redeploys its new reserves to defend against Ukrainian advances.**
- **A Ukrainian intelligence chief stated that the September 22 Ukrainian strike on the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Command headquarters in Sevastopol injured senior Russian commanders.**
- **Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 22 to 23.**
- **Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky appointed former Roscosmos (Russian space agency) head and ultranationalist figure Dmitry Rogozin as a Russian Federation Council senator representing occupied Zaporizhia Oblast**
- **A Russian insider source argued that the Russian military should reintroduce military officers for political affairs (zampolits) to address the Russian military’s problems with political and ideological commitment– a problem that Russian military thinkers identified in September 2018.**
- **Disjointed Wagner Group contingents reportedly returning to fight in Ukraine are likely to have a marginal impact on Russian combat capabilities without bringing the full suite of effectiveness Wagner had had as a unitary organization under financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin’s and founder Dmitry Utkin’s leadership.**



- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in western Donetsk Oblast, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any confirmed advances on September 23.**
- **Russian authorities are reportedly embezzling funds from military facilities near the border of Ukraine.**
- **Russian government programs continue to forcibly deport children in occupied Ukraine to Russia.**

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



***We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 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

### **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

#### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

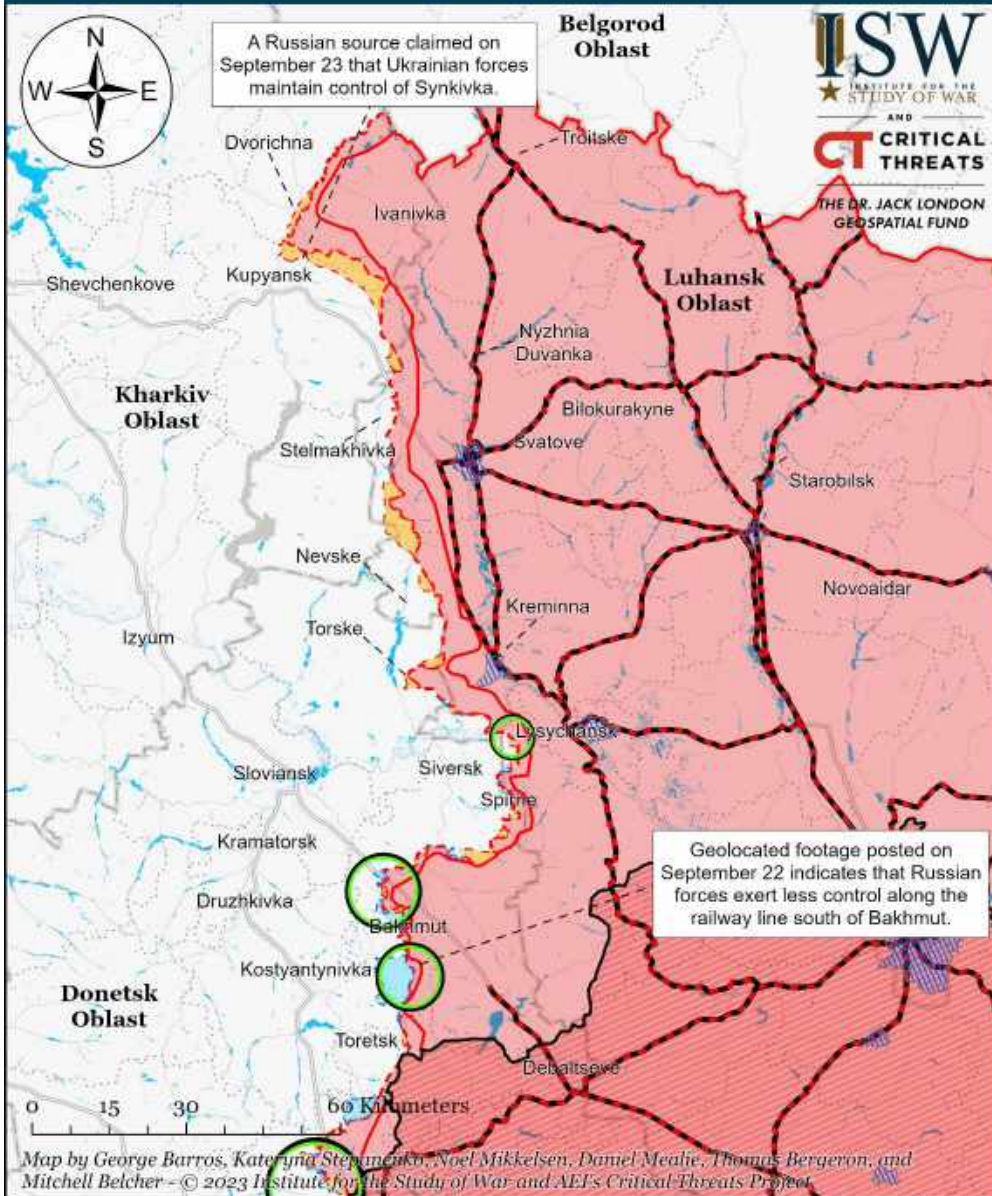
Russian forces reportedly conducted offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on September 22 but did not advance. A Russian milblogger claimed on September 22 that Russian forces conducted a ground attack near Novoyehorivka (15km southwest of Svatove) but did not specify an outcome.[48] The milblogger claimed that Russian forces continued consolidating their positions near Synkivka and that there were no significant changes in the Serebryanske forest area near Kreminna.[49]

Ukrainian officials did not report any Russian ground attacks on the Kreminna-Svatove line on September 23. Former Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated on September 23 that Russian forces in Luhansk Oblast have decreased the volume of their artillery fire because they are rotating personnel.[50]

Russian sources retracted claims that Russian forces occupy Synkivka (6km northeast of Kupyansk). The Russian MoD reported that Russian forces struck Ukrainian forces near Synkivka on September 23.[51] A prominent Russian milblogger reported that Ukrainian forces control Synkivka as of September 23.[52] Russian sources previously claimed that Russian forces had partially encircled Synkivka and captured the northern part of the settlement in mid-August 2023.[53]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of September 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

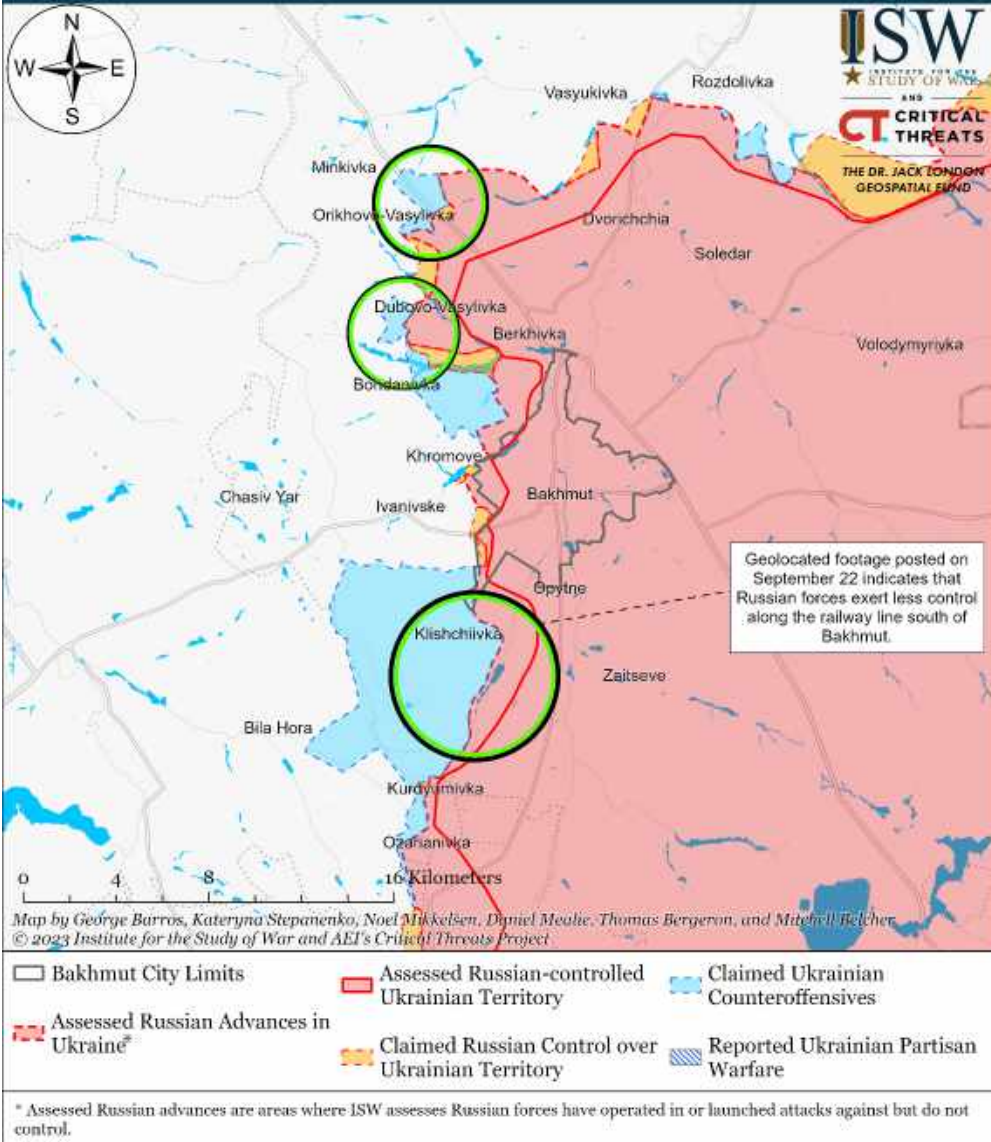
## **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)**

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations on Bakhmut’s southern flank on September 23, but did not make new territorial gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in an unspecified area south of Bakhmut.[54] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are repelling Ukrainian attacks at Kurdyumivka (12km southwest of Bakhmut).[55] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that Ukraine’s recent liberation of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut) enables Ukrainian forces to strike Russian rear positions and target Russian control points.[56] Yevlash added that Ukrainian positions are approximately three kilometers away from the Russian ground line of communication (GLOC), likely referring to Russian logistics line on the T0513 highway. Russian sources, including the Russian MoD, continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are not in full control of Klishchiivka and are continuing to fight for the settlement.[57]

Russian forces continued to counterattack on Bakhmut’s northern and southern flanks but did not achieve any confirmable advances on September 23. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully conducted ground attacks near Minkivka (13km northwest of Bakhmut), Orikhovo-Vasylivka (10km northwest of Bakhmut), Hryhorivka (9km northwest of Bakhmut), Klishchiivka, and Andriivka.[58] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger similarly stated that Russian forces are counterattacking in the Klishchiivka and Andriivka areas and are engaged in fierce battles over the heights on Bakhmut’s northern flank that stretches to the eastern outskirts of Berkhivka (3km north of Bakhmut).[59] The milblogger claimed that Russian forces still control most of the heights in the area.[60]

A Russian milblogger amplified information about a claimed encounter with mobilized servicemen of the 11th Separate Air Assault (VDV) Brigade in August 2023, which revealed that elements of this elite unit likely deployed in the Bakhmut area lack artillery support.[61] The milblogger received a message from one of his subscribers who claimed to have encountered newly arrived mobilized personnel of the 11th VDV Brigade who were committed to daily assaults on an unspecified frontline. ISW previously observed elements of the 11th VDV Brigade deploying to Bakhmut and participating in combat starting in June and July 2023.[62] The subscriber noted that elements of the 11th VDV Brigade launched assaults without proper artillery support and that the Russian Armed Forces failed to introduce additional reserves to reinforce the brigade’s unspecified 300-meter advance – resulting in numerous Russian deaths.

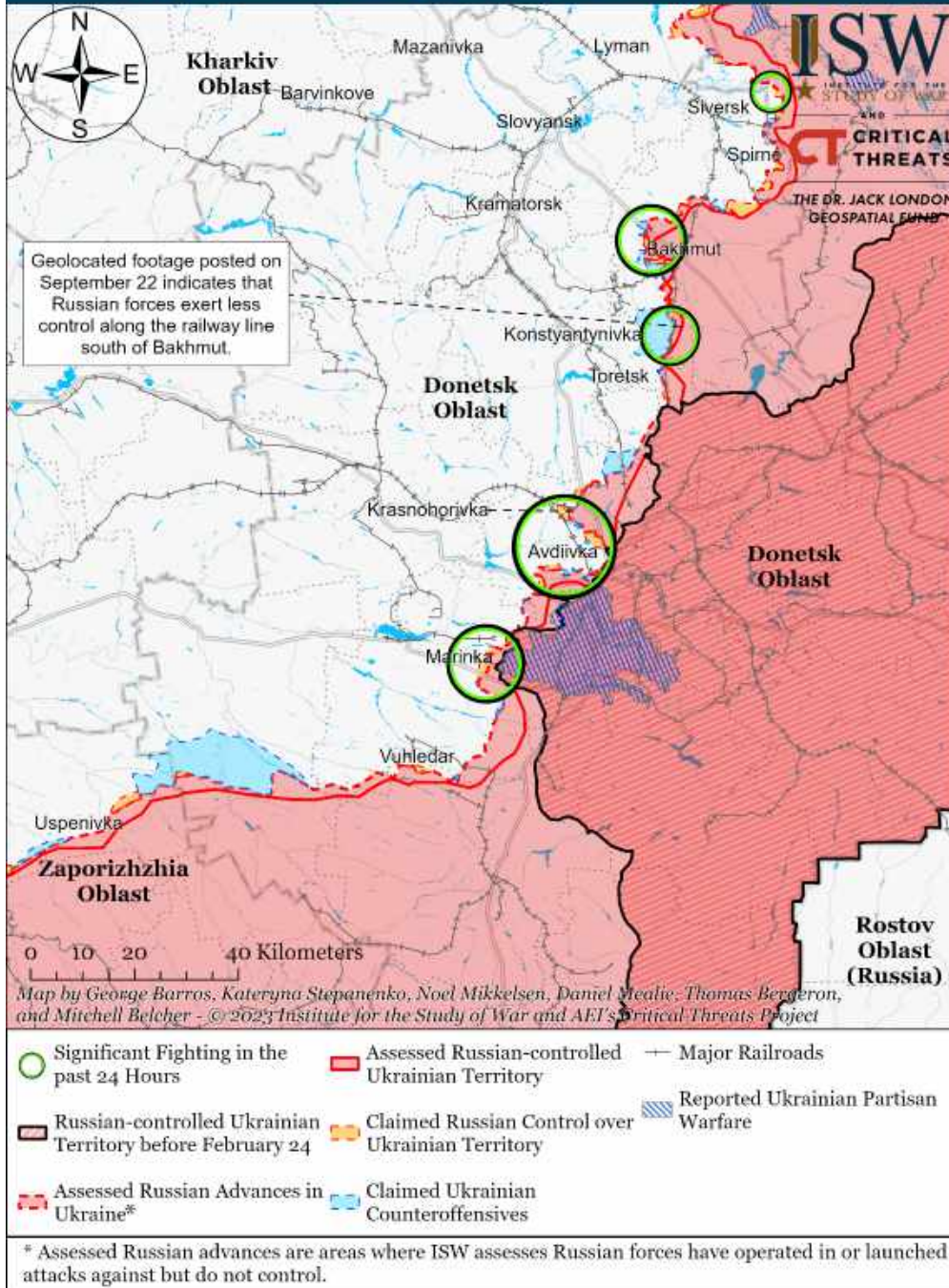
# Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of September 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian forces launched offensive operations on the Donetsk City-Avdiivka line on September 23 but did not advance. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Avdiivka, Sieverne (6km west of Avdiivka), Marinka (directly west of Donetsk City), Pobieda (5km southwest of Donetsk City), and Krasnohorivka (6km west of Donetsk City).[63] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces continued to attack Marinka and resumed offensives on the approaches to Krasnohorivka.[64]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of September 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



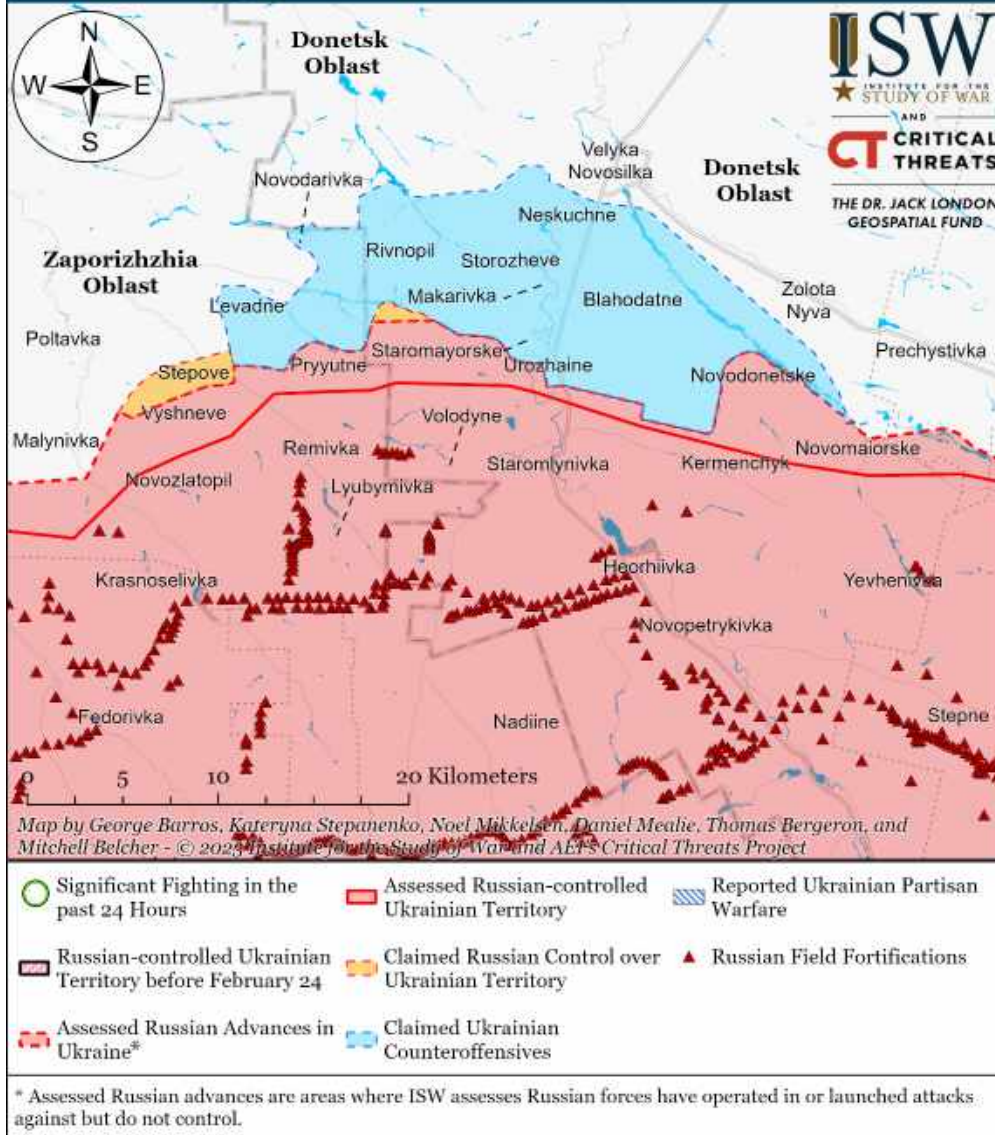
## **Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)**

A Russian milblogger claimed on September 23 that Russian forces attacked Ukrainian positions from the Mykilske direction (4km southeast of Vuhledar) but did not advance.[65]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area on September 23. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled five Ukrainian attacks in unspecified areas in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area.[66] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks west of Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka).[67]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area on September 23 and did not make confirmed advances. The Russian “Vostok” Battalion, reportedly operating in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast area, claimed that Russian forces regained unspecified positions previously lost in the Velyka Novosilka area and that elements of the Russian 40th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet) advanced in an unspecified area.[68] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces counterattacked near Novodonetske (12km southeast of Velyka Novosilka) and Novomayorske (18km southeast of Velyka Novosilka).[69] Footage published on September 23 purportedly shows elements of the Russian 394th Motorized Rifle Regiment (127th Motorized Rifle Division, 5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) operating near Rivnopil (10km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[70]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around the Vremivka Salient as of September 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

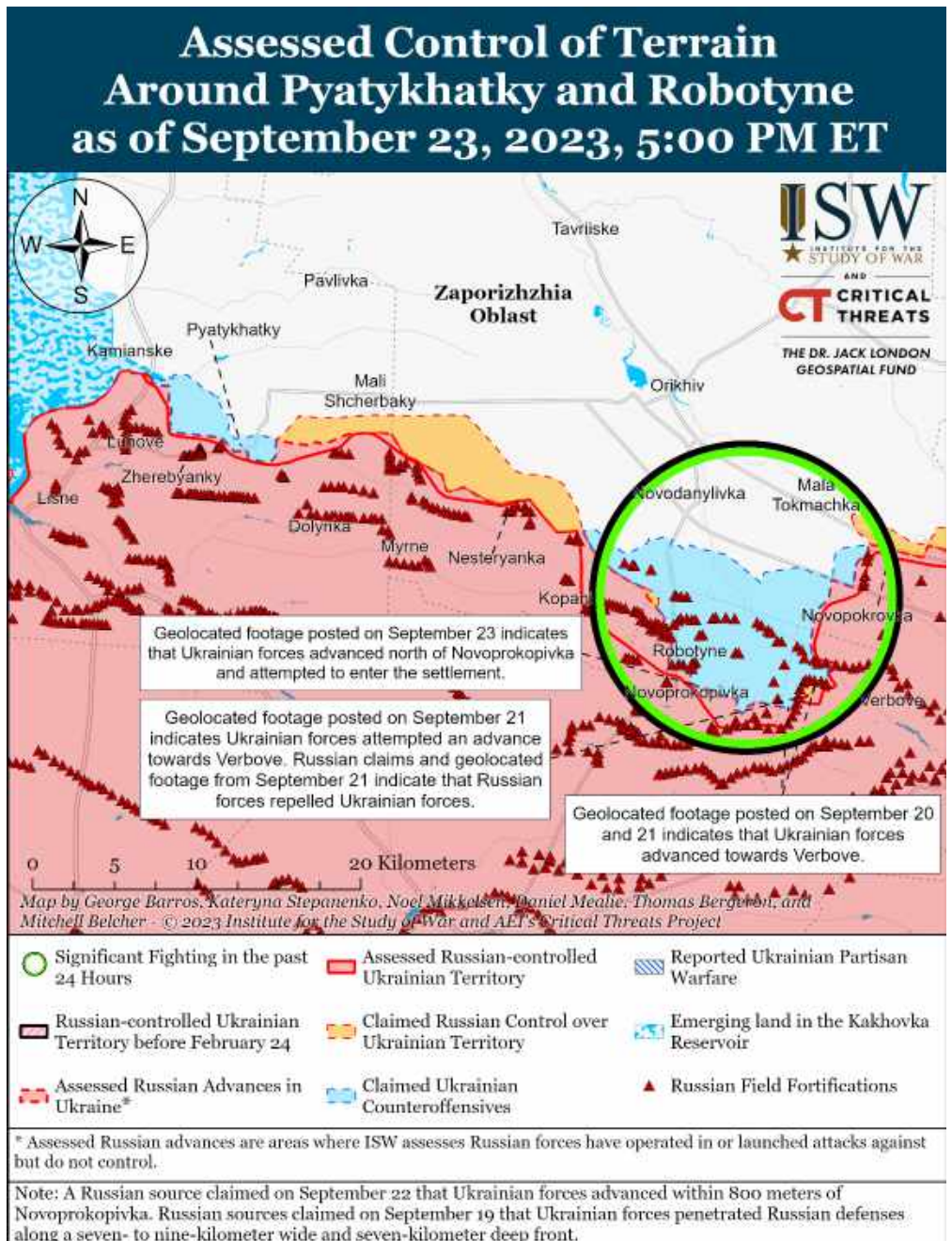


Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on September 23 and advanced. Geolocated imagery published on September 23 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced north of Novoprokopivka (14km south of Orikhiv).[71] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces are pushing Russian forces out of their positions Verbove area (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[72] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskiy stated in an interview with *CNN* published on September 23 that Ukrainian forces achieved a “breakthrough” on the left flank of Verbove and that Ukrainian forces continue to advance.[73] Russian milbloggers widely denied reports of a Ukrainian “breakthrough” near Verbove and Ukrainian advances in northern Novoprokopivka.[74] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian

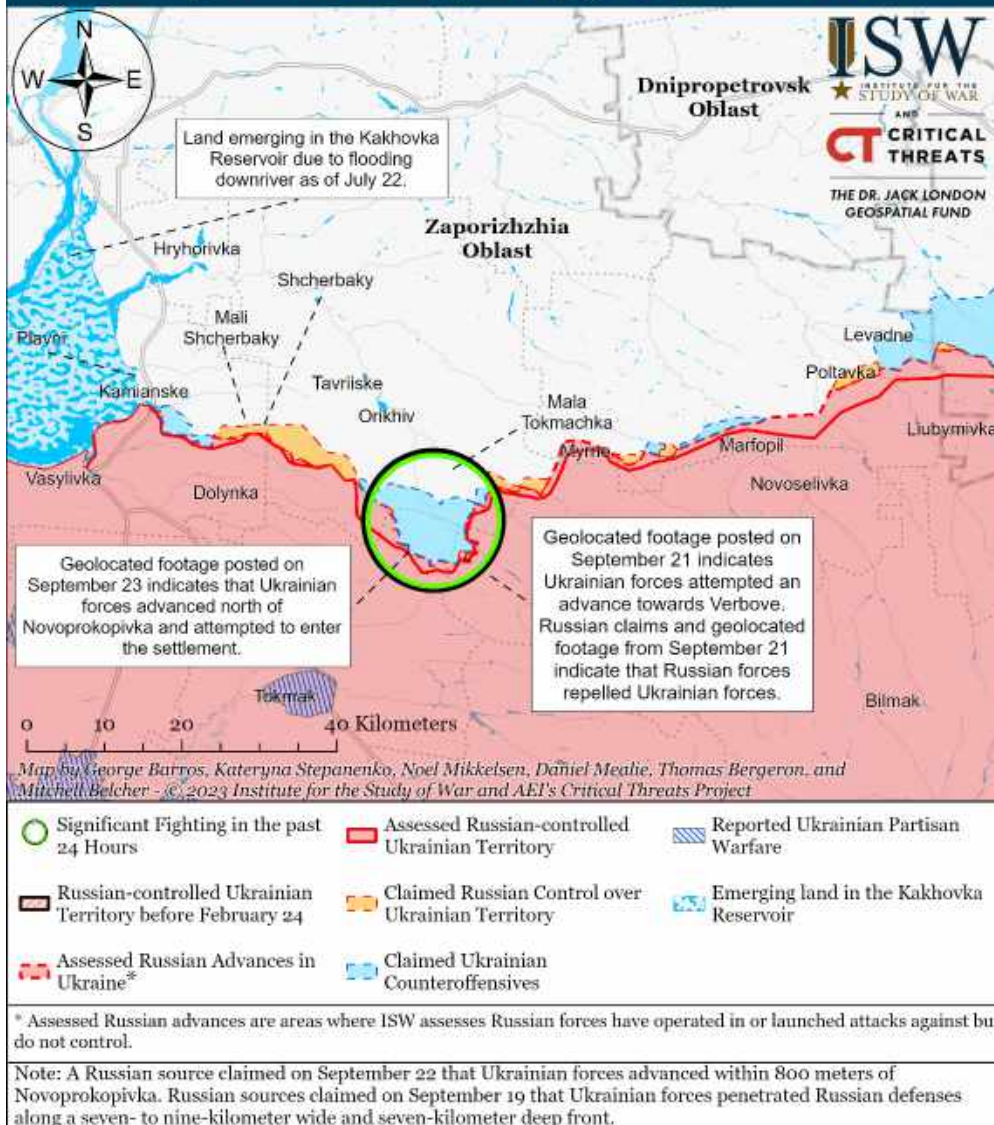


forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Verbove and Robotyne.[75] Russian milbloggers also claimed that fierce fighting is ongoing on the western outskirts of Robotyne.[76]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 23 but did not make confirmed advances. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces attacked near Mala Tokmachka (7km southeast of Orikhiv) and Robotyne.[77] Geolocated footage published on September 22 shows elements of the Russian “Osman” Spetsnaz unit operating west of Verbove.[78] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Russian forces have been using Storm-Z units in the past week in attempts to recapture positions near Robotyne.[79]



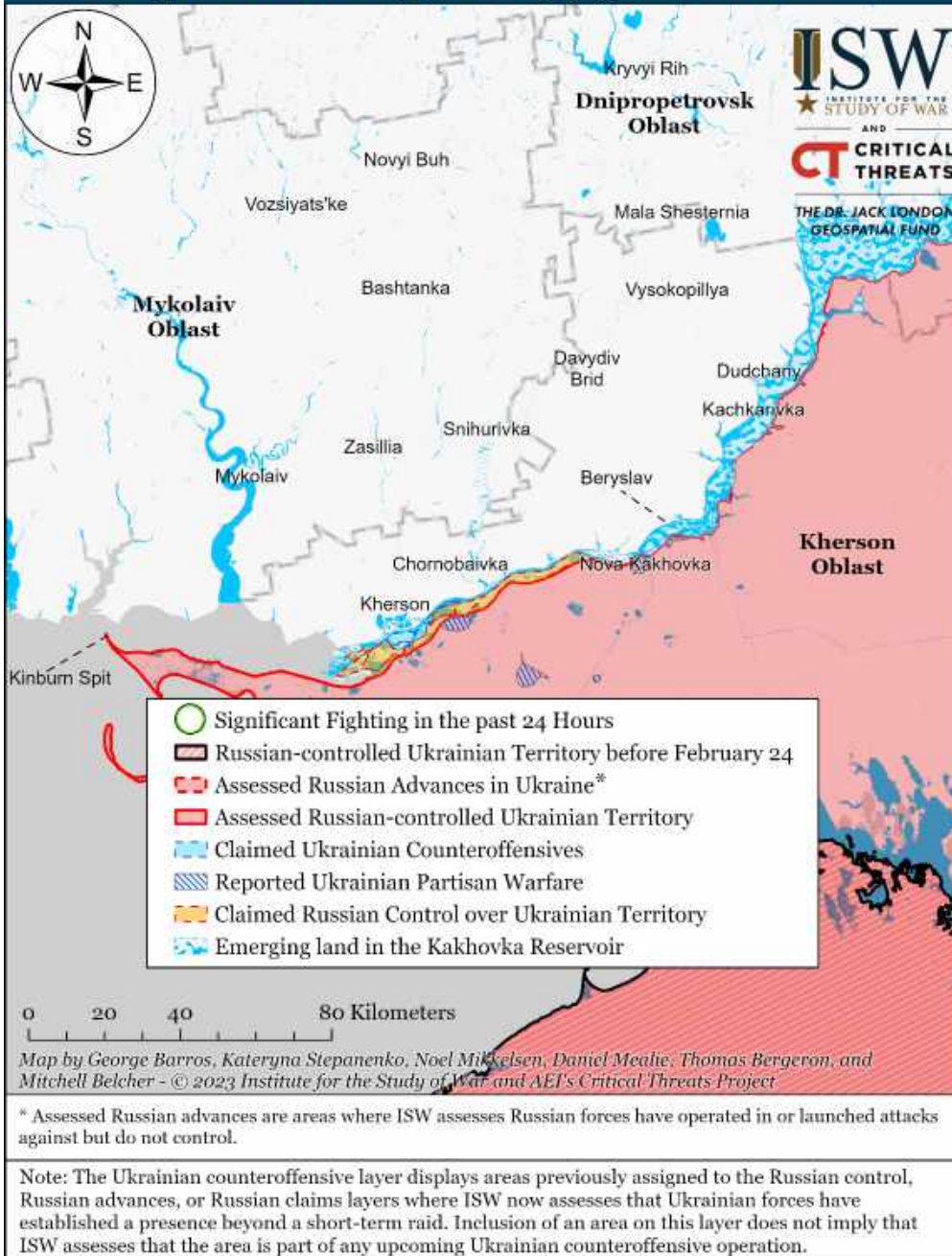
# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of September 23, 2023, 5:00 PM ET



Russian sources continue to claim that Ukrainian forces conduct cross-river raids in the Dnipro River delta. The Russian MoD claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attempted to establish positions on islands and on the left bank of the Dnipro River.[80] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces continue operating on islands in the Dnipro River delta.[81]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 23, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Russian authorities are reportedly embezzling funds from military facilities near the border of Ukraine. The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated on September 23 that aerial reconnaissance images



reportedly showing Russian military locations in Kursk Oblast indicate that Russian strongholds in the area near the border with Ukraine are unmanned, lacking equipment, and overgrown with vegetation.[82] The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated that there is evidence that unspecified actors embezzled from these military facilities and are falsely “imitating” the construction of defenses near the Ukrainian border.[83]

**Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

Russian government programs continue to forcibly deport children in occupied Ukraine to Russia. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration stated on September 22 that 90 children from occupied Kherson Oblast recently went to Moscow as part of the Russian Ministry of Culture’s “Cultural Map” program.[84] The Kherson Oblast occupation administration stated that Russian authorities will send “thousands” more children from occupied territories in Ukraine to Moscow and St. Petersburg by the end of 2023.[85]

The Russian United Russia party is attempting to assimilate Ukrainian children in occupied territories into Russia. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration stated that representatives of the United Russia party gave a Russian history lecture to over 100 children in Skadovsk Raion, Kherson Oblast, and that United Russia’s “Historical Conversations” project has already hosted over 1,500 similar lectures in Kherson Oblast.[86]

The Russian Republic of Mordovia continues to expand its patronage network in occupied Kherson Oblast. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration stated on September 23 that the Russian Republic of Mordovia supplied schools in Kalanchak Raion, Kherson Oblast, with textbooks and equipment.[87] ISW has previously reported on the recent expansion of the patronage network between the Republic of Mordovia and occupied Kherson Oblast.[88]

**Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

A combined Belarusian air defense and anti-air rocket forces contingent returned to Belarus on September 23 after training in the Russian Far East.[89] Elements of the Belarusian 1st Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment, the 377th Guards Anti-Aircraft Missile Regiment, and the 15th Anti-Aircraft Missile Brigade conducted tactical live fire exercises with S-300 air defense systems at the Russian Telemba Training Ground in Buryatia.[90] It is unclear if these Belarusian elements exercised with Russian counterparts or simply trained at Russian training grounds. This training likely helps develop the joint Russian-Belarusian regional air defense system which effectively subordinates Belarus’ Air and Air Defense command to Russia’s Western Military District.[91]

**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.**

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# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

Christina Harward, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 22, 2023, 7pm 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 2:45pm ET on September 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.**

**Ukrainian forces carried out drone and cruise missile strikes on occupied Crimea and significantly damaged the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Command headquarters in Sevastopol on September 22.** The Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) stated that Ukrainian forces launched a successful strike on the Russian BSF Command headquarters in Sevastopol, Crimea on September 22.<sup>1</sup> Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces used Storm Shadow cruise missiles to conduct the strike, and social media footage of the headquarters indicates significant damage to the building.<sup>2</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian air defenses shot down five Ukrainian missiles and acknowledged that the Ukrainian strike damaged a building of BSF Command headquarters.<sup>3</sup> Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces launched a drone strike preceding the missile strike, and the Russian MoD claimed that Russian air defenses shot down two Ukrainian drones on the western coast of Crimea on the morning of September 22.<sup>4</sup>

Ukrainian Air Force Commander Lieutenant General Mykola Oleshchuk thanked Ukrainian pilots in general when amplifying footage of the strike.<sup>5</sup> Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Ukrainian forces will strike more Russian military targets in Crimea in the future.<sup>6</sup> Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Secretary Oleksiy Danilov stated that Ukrainian forces will continue to strike Sevastopol and that the Russian BSF should destroy their own ships in order to avoid further Ukrainian strikes.<sup>7</sup>





**The Russian information space heavily focused its attention on the Ukrainian strike on Sevastopol on September 22.** One Russian milblogger complained about Russian authorities’ inability to control the spread of Ukrainian information about the consequences of the strike, and other milbloggers criticized Russian authorities and the Russian military for not retaliating sufficiently.<sup>8</sup> Another Russian milblogger claimed that such Ukrainian strikes on Crimea are expected as Ukraine and its Western partners consider Crimea to be Ukrainian territory.<sup>9</sup> Multiple Russian milbloggers claimed that Western partners helped Ukrainian forces target the BSF Command headquarters.<sup>10</sup>

**Ukrainian forces advanced south of Bakhmut and reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 22.** Geolocated footage published on September 22 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced southeast of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).<sup>11</sup> A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces slightly advanced north of Novoprokopivka and are currently about 800 meters away from the settlement’s outskirts, a claim that generally corresponds to ISW’s assessment of the closest approach of the Ukrainian counter-offensive to the settlement.<sup>12</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction and offensive actions in the Bakhmut direction, exhausting and inflicting losses on Russian forces along the entire front.<sup>13</sup>

**The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package on September 21, providing Ukraine with \$325 million worth of military equipment.**<sup>14</sup> The DoD package includes AIM-9M missiles for air defense; additional ammunition for HIMARS systems; Avenger air defense systems; anti-drone machine guns; 155mm and 105mm artillery rounds, including dual-purpose

improved conventional munitions (DPICM); Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wire-Guided (TOW) missiles; Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems; over three million rounds of small arms ammunition; light tactical vehicles; demolition munitions for obstacle clearing; and spare parts, maintenance equipment, and other field equipment.

**The US will reportedly soon provide long-range army tactical missile systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine.** Four unnamed US government officials told *NBC News* in an article published on September 22 that US President Joe Biden told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that the US would provide Ukraine with “a small number of long-range missiles.”<sup>15</sup> The officials did not state when the US would announce the provision of ATACMS or when the US would deliver them to Ukraine.<sup>16</sup> One US official told *NBC News* that US officials are still discussing the type of missile and the number of missiles the US would provide to Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> Several unnamed people familiar with ongoing deliberations on ATACMS also told the *Washington Post* that the Biden administration plans to provide Ukraine with a version of ATACMS armed with cluster bomblets rather than a single (unitary) warhead.<sup>18</sup> The *Washington Post* reported that cluster-armed ATACMS have a range of up to 190 miles (depending on the version) and could allow Ukraine to strike Russian military positions far into the rear.

**Russian efforts to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners appear to have suffered a setback as Polish Prime Minister Andrzej Duda reiterated the strength of Polish-Ukrainian relations on September 22.** Duda clarified Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki’s September 21 statement that Poland would no longer transfer weapons to Ukraine and explained that Poland would continue to fulfill weapons supplies agreements with Ukraine but would not transfer new weapons that Poland purchases for its own military.<sup>19</sup> Duda also stated that the potential conflict between the two countries regarding the export of Ukrainian grain along European land routes does not “significantly affect” the two countries’ relationship.<sup>20</sup> ISW has previously assessed that Russian strikes on Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure are part of a Russian campaign to damage Ukrainian relations with its Western neighbors, and Poland’s swift reiteration of its commitment to Ukraine indicates that this campaign is not succeeding as much as Moscow likely intends.<sup>21</sup>

**A Ukrainian military official swiftly denied Russian claims that Wagner Group forces are operating in occupied Kherson Oblast.** Several Russian sources claimed on September 22 that Wagner personnel arrived in combat areas in occupied Kherson Oblast and that assault troops are distributed across sectors of the Kherson Oblast frontline.<sup>22</sup> Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk denied this claim on September 22 and stated that Russian sources likely disseminate such claims in order to improve Russian morale.<sup>23</sup> Humenyuk also stated that Chechen forces and Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) forces arrived in occupied Kherson “a few weeks ago” in order to prevent Russian military personnel from deserting.<sup>24</sup> Russian milbloggers may be claiming that Wagner forces have arrived in occupied Kherson Oblast amid rumors that Wagner forces will return to hostilities in Ukraine operating alongside Rosgvardia.<sup>25</sup>

**The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is reportedly investigating high-ranking Rosgvardia officials over their potential involvement in Wagner Group’s rebellion on June 24.** A Russian insider source claimed on September 22 that the FSB is investigating Rosgvardia officials after Rosgvardia reportedly allowed Wagner to “hide” shells and equipment in Rosgvardia’s warehouses immediately after the Wagner rebellion and during the period of Wagner’s disarmament.<sup>26</sup> The source claimed that an unspecified Rosgvardia general with the first name “Roman” oversaw the storage of up to four large containers of Wagner military equipment near a Rosgvardia training ground in the area of “Kazachy Stan” (likely a settlement in an unspecified region of Russia).<sup>27</sup> ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin likely aimed to consolidate Russia’s internal security apparatus around Rosgvardia following the Wagner rebellion.<sup>28</sup> The Russian Ministry of

Defense (MoD) announced on June 27 that it would prepare to transfer Wagner’s heavy military equipment to unspecified elements of the Russian military on the same day that Rosgvardia Head Viktor Zolotov announced that Rosgvardia would receive heavy weapons and tanks.<sup>29</sup> The Russian government also officially transferred the “Grom” special units of the Russian Federal Drug Control Service (of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs) to the control of Rosgvardia in July.<sup>30</sup>

#### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Ukrainian forces carried out drone and cruise missile strikes on occupied Crimea and significantly damaged the Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) Command headquarters in Sevastopol on September 22.**
- **The Russian information space heavily focused its attention on the Ukrainian strike on Sevastopol on September 22.**
- **Ukrainian forces advanced south of Bakhmut and reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 22.**
- **The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a new security assistance package on September 21, providing Ukraine with \$325 million worth of military equipment.**
- **The US will reportedly soon provide long-range army tactical missile systems (ATACMS) to Ukraine.**
- **Russian efforts to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners appear to have suffered a setback as Polish Prime Minister Andrzej Duda reiterated the strength of Polish-Ukrainian relations on September 22.**
- **A Ukrainian military official swiftly denied Russian claims that Wagner Group forces are operating in occupied Kherson Oblast.**
- **The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) is reportedly investigating high-ranking Rosgvardia officials over their potential involvement in Wagner Group’s rebellion on June 24.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations in the Kupyansk area, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Donetsk Oblast and reportedly advanced in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border area.**
- **The Russian government is reportedly planning to increase defense spending by 4.4 trillion rubles (\$46 billion) in 2024.**

*We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 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

## **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

Russian forces reportedly conducted offensive operations in the Kupyansk area on September 22 but did not advance. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are counterattacking in an unspecified area in the Kupyansk direction.<sup>31</sup> Ukrainian Severodonetsk City Administration Head Roman Vlasenko stated on September 22 that Russian forces are more actively using artillery and aviation in operations in Luhansk Oblast in order to save manpower and equipment.<sup>32</sup> A milblogger also noted that Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) have increased their operations over the past week in an attempt to strike Ukrainian forward positions and logistics.<sup>33</sup>

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line on September 22. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Hryhorivka (11km south of Kreminna) and the Serebryanske forest area (11km south of Kreminna).<sup>34</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are conducting small and unsuccessful attacks near Novoselivske (14km northwest of Svatove).<sup>35</sup> Another Russian milblogger retracted his September 21 claim that Ukrainian forces regained previously lost positions in Novoselivske and claimed that Ukrainian forces actually conducted counterattacks in Novoyehorivka (16km southwest of Svatove).<sup>36</sup>

### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)**

Ukrainian forces continued assaults near Bakhmut on September 22 and advanced. Geolocated footage published on September 22 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced southeast of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).<sup>37</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced near Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut) and that Russian forces established defensive positions along the railway near the settlement.<sup>38</sup> The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued assaults south of Bakhmut, inflicting losses on Russian manpower and equipment and consolidating newly secured positions.<sup>39</sup>

Russian forces continued ground attacks near Bakhmut on September 22 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Mynkivka (13km northeast of Bakhmut), Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut), Hryhorivka (9km northwest of Bakhmut), and Andriivka.<sup>40</sup> Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash and Russian milbloggers stated that Russian forces unsuccessfully counterattacked near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.<sup>41</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces control these settlements, contrary to the visual evidence that ISW has observed.<sup>42</sup> Another Russian milblogger claimed on September 21 that the situation is very difficult for Russian forces along the Klishchiivka-Kurdyumivka (7-12km southwest of Bakhmut) line, particularly near Andriivka.<sup>43</sup> The milblogger claimed that Russian forces will not have enough manpower to defend against future Ukrainian attacks in this area unless they stop their “ill-conceived and unsupported” counterattacks.<sup>44</sup> Another Russian milblogger amplified footage on September 22 claiming to show elements of the Russian 57th Separate Guards Motorized Rifle Brigade (5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) and Chechen Akhmat Spetsnaz operating near Kurdyumivka (12km southwest of Bakhmut).<sup>45</sup>

Ukrainian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on September 22 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued to defend



against Russian attacks and inflicted losses against Russian manpower and equipment in the Avdiivka direction.<sup>46</sup> The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that elements of the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces repelled four Ukrainian attacks near Vodiane (on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City) and Marinka (directly southwest of Donetsk City).<sup>47</sup>

Russian forces continued ground attacks along the Avdiivka–Donetsk City line on September 22 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Sieverne (6km west of Avdiivka), Krasnohorivka (directly west of Donetsk City), and Marinka.<sup>48</sup> A Russian milblogger also claimed that Russian forces assaulted Sieverne and Marinka but did not specify an outcome.<sup>49</sup> Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces recaptured another Trudovske mine ventilation shaft just south of Krasnohorivka, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.<sup>50</sup>

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

Russian forces continued launching unsuccessful localized attacks in western Donetsk Oblast and preparing defensive positions near Mariupol on September 22. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Mykilske (5km southeast of Vuhledar).<sup>51</sup> Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported that Russian forces transported “dragons teeth” fortifications equipment in the direction of Nikolske (16km northwest of Mariupol) to build a defensive line in the area that would defend Russia’s ground lines of communication (GLOCs) towards occupied Crimea.<sup>52</sup> Andryushchenko also reported that Ukrainian forces struck an unspecified Russian target in Rozivka (44km northwest of Mariupol).<sup>53</sup>

Ukrainian forces continued localized attacks on the administrative border between Donetsk and Zaporizhia oblasts but were reportedly unsuccessful on September 22. A Russian news aggregator claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Pryutne (14km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).<sup>54</sup> The Russian “Vostok” Battalion claimed that the situation in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border is stable and that Ukrainian forces are not attempting to advance, however.<sup>55</sup>

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces achieved limited territorial gains in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast administrative border area on September 22, but ISW has not observed visual evidence confirming these claims. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed on September 22 that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian attack near Zavitne Bazhannya (11km south of Velyka Novosilka), advanced along the Mokri Yaly River valley, and seized unspecified Ukrainian positions.<sup>56</sup> A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces carried out successful counterattacks from Novodonetske (12km southeast of Velyka Novosilka) and Novomayorske (18km southeast of Velyka Novosilka).<sup>57</sup> Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces cleared an unspecified area between Novodonetske and Novomayorske of Ukrainian forces.<sup>58</sup>

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 22 and reportedly advanced north of Novoprokopivka (14km south of Orikhiv).<sup>59</sup> A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces slightly advanced north of Novoprokopivka and are currently about 800 meters away from the settlement’s outskirts – an observation consistent with ISW’s control-of-terrain maps.<sup>60</sup> The milblogger added that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attempted to advance near Verbove (18km south of Orikhiv). The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing offensive operations in the Melitopol direction, are inflicting manpower and equipment losses on Russian forces, and are forcing Russian forces to withdraw from their positions.<sup>61</sup> A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces have not broken through the “Surovikin” defense line west of Verbove and claimed that Ukrainian forces have not achieved any visible successes in the area in a month.<sup>62</sup>

Russian forces continued to counterattack in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 22, but did not make new territorial gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Mala Tokmachka (7km southeast of Orikhiv) and Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).<sup>63</sup> A Russian milblogger claimed that both sides are heavily using artillery and drones in western Zaporizhia Oblast.<sup>64</sup>

Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are conducting cross-river raids in the Dnipro River delta. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces still hold positions near Dachi (10km south of Kherson City) and near the Antonivsky Bridge on the east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.<sup>65</sup> A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups operated on several islands in the delta on September 22.<sup>66</sup> Russian milbloggers also reamplified complaints that Russian forces lack high-speed boats to repel Ukrainian operations in the delta.<sup>67</sup>

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

The Russian government is reportedly planning to increase defense spending by 4.4 trillion rubles (\$46 billion) in 2024. *Bloomberg* reported on September 22 that draft plans of the Russian 2024 budget indicate that Russian defense spending will increase to 10.8 trillion rubles (about \$113 billion) in 2024, up from 6.4 trillion rubles (about \$67 billion) in 2023.<sup>68</sup> *Bloomberg* reported that Russia plans to spend six percent of its projected gross domestic product (GDP) on defense in 2024, compared to 3.9 percent in 2023 and 2.7 percent in 2021.<sup>69</sup> *Bloomberg* reported that classified expenditures will also rise from 6.5 trillion rubles (about \$68 billion) in 2023 to 11.1 trillion rubles (about \$116 billion) in 2024.<sup>70</sup> *Bloomberg* reported that the Russian government expects state revenues to increase by 22 percent in 2024 and the state deficit to decrease by 50 percent, although it is unclear how likely this outcome is considering international sanctions against Russia and the high cost of the war in Ukraine.<sup>71</sup>

The Russian State Duma is considering extending additional laws related to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia). Russian State Duma deputies, including Chairperson of the State Duma Committee on Information Policy Alexander Khinshtein and Chairperson of the State Duma Committee on Defense Andrei Kartapolov, introduced a bill to the Duma that would extend the law on punishing those who “discredit” and spread “fake” information about the Russian armed forces to Rosgvardia forces as well.<sup>72</sup> ISW previously reported that the Duma is also reportedly considering legislation that would extend Russian MoD powers and mechanisms to include volunteer formations to Rosgvardia.<sup>73</sup> ISW also previously reported on speculation that the Wagner Group personnel are working closely with Rosgvardia in order to rejoin the war in Ukraine.<sup>74</sup>

Russian authorities are expanding drone development facilities in Russia. The Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Tatarstan Roman Shaikhutdinov announced on September 22 that the Innopolis Special Economic Zone and Innopolis University have entered an agreement with the Unmanned Aircraft Systems LLC to test the drone companies’ products in Tatarstan.<sup>75</sup> ISW previously reported on Russian efforts to expand domestic drone development and production throughout Russia and assessed that the Russian military command may be using a large number of strike drones in Ukraine in order to overwhelm Ukrainian air defenses.<sup>76</sup>

### **Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

Russian occupation officials continue to restrict the use of Ukrainian language in educational institutions in occupied Ukraine in order to Russify the occupied territories and eradicate Ukrainian culture and identity. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov demanded the punishment of schools and teachers in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast who give “unauthorized” lessons in Ukrainian, which Rogov claimed is a “non-native language” for Ukrainian students.<sup>77</sup>

**Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

Belarus reportedly continues its efforts to recruit Wagner Group personnel into a new Belarusian private military company (PMC). The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on September 22 that Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko is attempting to recruit Wagner instructors in Belarus to the new Belarusian PMC “GardService” by promising Wagner personnel apartments without having to wait in the government housing queue.<sup>78</sup> The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported that the attempted recruitment of Wagner personnel is increasing social tensions among Belarusian security forces.<sup>79</sup>

**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.**

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<sup>31</sup> <https://t.me/batalyon15/2977>

<sup>32</sup> <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/13791>

<sup>33</sup> [https://t.me/multi\\_XAM/805](https://t.me/multi_XAM/805)

<sup>34</sup> [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30720](https://t.me/mod_russia/30720)

<sup>35</sup> [https://t.me/boris\\_rozhin/98273](https://t.me/boris_rozhin/98273)

<sup>36</sup> <https://t.me/wargonzo/15202>

<sup>37</sup> <https://t.me/RVvoenkori/53502>; <https://x.com/EjShahid/status/1705288958446309439?s=20>;

<sup>38</sup> <https://t.me/zvofront/1129> ; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1705212544531521729>

<sup>39</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0LkQFeF4mEJwSXCP4dNdWMwSqzHtUMuvQQEXFku6E35e4MApTE2hkVtk9Ke4r9bfl>

<sup>40</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0LkQFeF4mEJwSXCP4dNdWMwSqzHtUMuvQQEXFku6E35e4MApTE2hkVtk9Ke4r9bfl> ;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02Rbj5iL197krzxr71hEMDdYSUj5RLDr6RKf9ZQiyA7LCdB2nGK93yZVoJUCXPxJB6l> ;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0LkQFeF4mEJwSXCP4dNdWMwSqzHtUMuvQQEXFku6E35e4MApTE2hkVtk9Ke4r9bfl> ;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02Rbj5iL197krzxr71hEMDdYSUj5RLDr6RKf9ZQiyA7LCdB2nGK93yZVoJUCXPxJB6l>

<sup>41</sup> <https://armyinform.com.ua/2023/09/22/na-bahmutskom-ukraintsy-likvidovano-ponad-200-okupantiv-illya-yevlash/> ; <https://t.me/wargonzo/15202> ; [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/26000](https://t.me/dva_majors/26000)

<sup>42</sup> [https://t.me/multi\\_XAM/805](https://t.me/multi_XAM/805)

<sup>43</sup> [https://t.me/philologist\\_zov/530](https://t.me/philologist_zov/530) ; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1705029154012385577>

<sup>44</sup> [https://t.me/philologist\\_zov/530](https://t.me/philologist_zov/530) ; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1705029154012385577>

<sup>45</sup> [https://t.me/voin\\_dv/5073](https://t.me/voin_dv/5073)

<sup>46</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0LkQFeF4mEJwSXCP4dNdWMwSqzHtUMuvQQEXFku6E35e4MApTE2hkVtk9Ke4r9bfl>

<sup>47</sup> [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30720](https://t.me/mod_russia/30720) ; [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30723](https://t.me/mod_russia/30723)

<sup>48</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02Rbj5iL197krzxr71hEMDdYSUj5RLDr6RKf9ZQiyA7LCdB2nGK93yZVoJUCXPxJB6l> ;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0LkQFeF4mEJwSXCP4dNdWMwSqzHtUMuvQQEXFku6E35e4MApTE2hkVtk9Ke4r9bfl> ;

<https://www.facebook.com/PresscentrTavria/posts/pfbid0RU5kPN55ZUv2MCsLxHwTLgtE7SksvJH6UyjDcsomNF1MZuvCePjdPiKMgbeYEgPMI>

<sup>49</sup> <https://t.me/wargonzo/15202>

<sup>50</sup> <https://t.me/zvofront/1130>

<sup>51</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0LkQFeF4mEJwSXCP4dNdWMwSqzHtUMuvQQEXFku6E35e4MApTE2hkVtk9Ke4r9bfl> ;

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<sup>52</sup> <https://t.me/andriyshTime/13640>

<sup>53</sup> <https://t.me/andriyshTime/13651>

<sup>54</sup> <https://t.me/readovkanews/66467>

<sup>55</sup> [https://t.me/batalyon\\_vostok/193](https://t.me/batalyon_vostok/193)

<sup>56</sup> <https://t.me/vrogov/12154> ; [https://tass dot](https://tass.ru/politika/18817335?utm_source=yxnews&utm_medium=desktop&utm_referrer=https%3A%2F%2F)

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<sup>57</sup> <https://t.me/wargonzo/15202>

<sup>58</sup> [https://t.me/voyn\\_dv/5061](https://t.me/voyn_dv/5061)

<sup>59</sup> <https://t.me/wargonzo/15202>

<sup>60</sup> <https://t.me/wargonzo/15202>

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<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0LkQFeF4mEJwSXCP4dNdWMwSqzHtUMuvQQEXFku6E35e4MApTE2hkVtk9Ke4r9bfl> ;

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<sup>62</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/52238>

<sup>63</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0LkQFeF4mEJwSXCP4dNdWMwSqzHtUMuvQQEXFku6E35e4MApTE2hkVtk9Ke4r9bfl> ;

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<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02Rbj5iL197krzxr71hEMDdYSUj5RLDr6RKf9ZQiyA7LCdB2nGK93yZVoJUcXPxJB6I>

<sup>64</sup> [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/26068](https://t.me/dva_majors/26068) ; <https://t.me/frontbird/3581>

<sup>65</sup> [https://t.me/multi\\_XAM/805](https://t.me/multi_XAM/805)

<sup>66</sup> <https://t.me/rybar/52227>; [https://t.me/boris\\_rozhin/98245](https://t.me/boris_rozhin/98245)[https://t.me/dva\\_majors/26000](https://t.me/dva_majors/26000)

<sup>67</sup> <https://t.me/osetin20/7085> ; [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/26071](https://t.me/dva_majors/26071); [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/26072](https://t.me/dva_majors/26072)

<sup>68</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-22/russia-plans-huge-defense-spending-hike-in-2024-as-war-drags-on>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-22/russia-plans-huge-defense-spending-hike-in-2024-as-war-drags-on>

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-22/russia-plans-huge-defense-spending-hike-in-2024-as-war-drags-on>

<sup>71</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-09-22/russia-plans-huge-defense-spending-hike-in-2024-as-war-drags-on>

<sup>72</sup> [https://meduza dot io/news/2023/09/22/v-dumu-vnesli-zakonoproekt-ob-otvetstvennosti-za-diskreditatsiyu-boytsov-rosgvardii-uchastvuyuschih-v-voyne](https://meduza.io/news/2023/09/22/v-dumu-vnesli-zakonoproekt-ob-otvetstvennosti-za-diskreditatsiyu-boytsov-rosgvardii-uchastvuyuschih-v-voyne) ; [http://duma dot gov.ru/news/57877/](http://duma.gov.ru/news/57877/) ; [http://duma dot gov.ru/news/57877/](http://duma.gov.ru/news/57877/)

<sup>73</sup> <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-21-2023>

<sup>74</sup> <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-21-2023> ;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-18-2023>

<sup>75</sup> [https://www.idelreal dot org/a/32604492.html](https://www.idelreal.org/a/32604492.html)

<sup>76</sup> [https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-9-](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-9-2023)

[2023](https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-9-2023) ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-3-2023> ;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-17-2023> ;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-6-2023> ;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-28-2023>

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<sup>77</sup> <https://t.me/vrogov/12142>

<sup>78</sup> [https://sprotyv.mod.gov dot ua/rezhym-lukashenka-obitsyaye-vagnerivtsyam-zhytlo-v-obmin-na-loyalnist/](https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/rezhym-lukashenka-obitsyaye-vagnerivtsyam-zhytlo-v-obmin-na-loyalnist/)

<sup>79</sup> [https://sprotyv.mod.gov dot ua/rezhym-lukashenka-obitsyaye-vagnerivtsyam-zhytlo-v-obmin-na-loyalnist/](https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/rezhym-lukashenka-obitsyaye-vagnerivtsyam-zhytlo-v-obmin-na-loyalnist/)

# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 21, 2023

Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans, Christina Harward,  
Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 21, 2023, 8:55pm ET

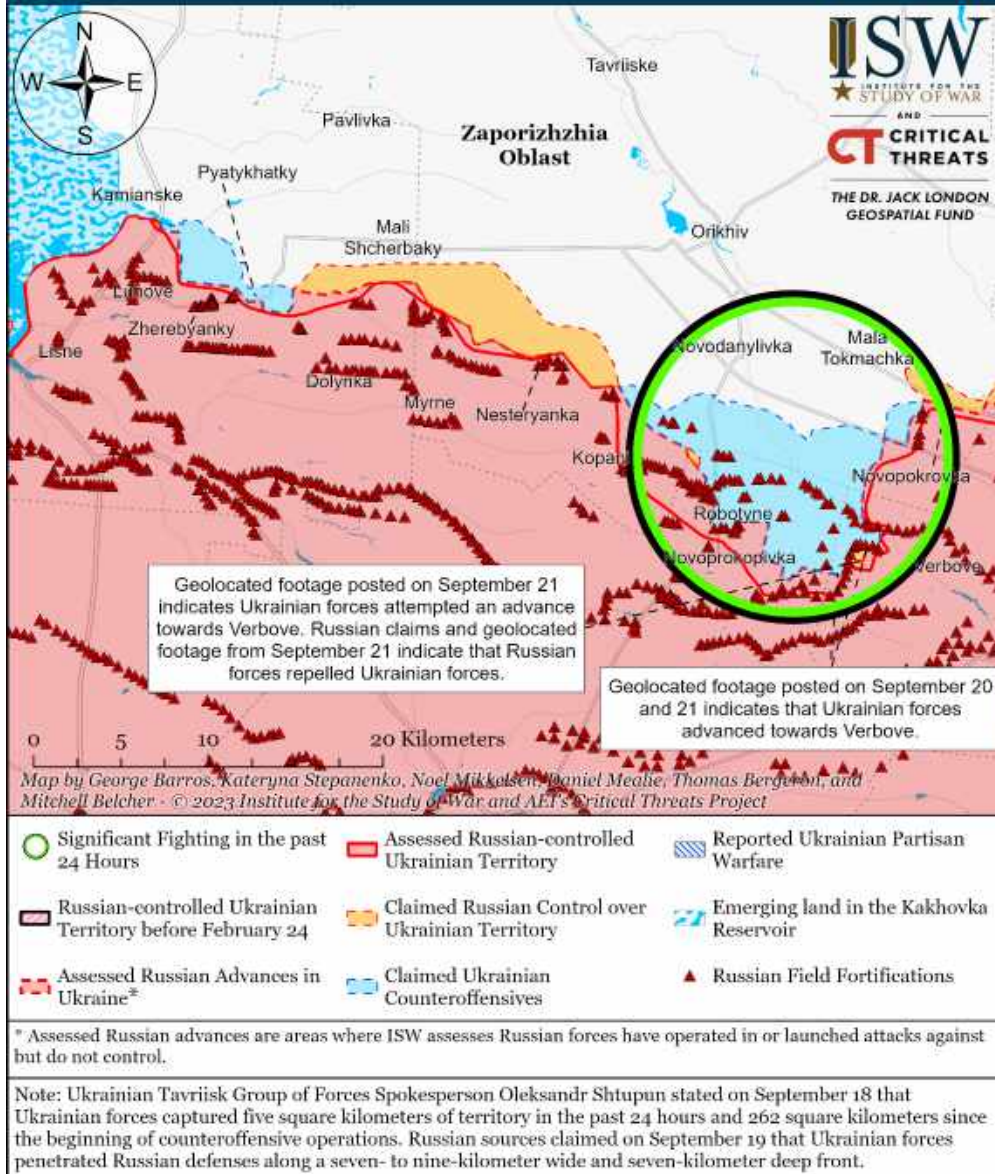
Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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 2:45pm ET on September 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment. Ukrainian armored vehicles are operating beyond the final line of the Russian defensive layer that Ukrainian forces in western Zaporizhia Oblast are currently penetrating, although ISW is not yet prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have broken fully through this Russian defensive layer.** Geolocated footage posted on September 21 indicates that Ukrainian armored vehicles advanced south of the Russian anti-tank ditches and dragon's teeth obstacles that are part of a tri-layered defense and engaged in limited combat immediately west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[1] It is unclear if Ukrainian forces retain these positions, however. This is the first observed instance of Ukrainian forces operating armored vehicles beyond the Russian tri-layer defense.[2] The presence of Ukrainian armored vehicles beyond the final line of the current Russian defensive layer indicates that the Ukrainians have secured their breach of the first two lines of this layer sufficiently to operate vehicles through the breach. Ukrainian forces have likely suppressed Russian artillery and other anti-tank systems in the area enough to bring their vehicles forward.[3] The Ukrainian ability to bring armored vehicles to and through the most formidable Russian defenses intended to stop them and to operate these vehicles near prepared Russian defensive positions are important signs of progress in the Ukrainian counteroffensive.[4] Additional geolocated footage published on September 20 and 21 indicates that Ukrainian forces also advanced west and southwest of Verbove.[5]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of September 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



*The Wall Street Journal (WSJ)* reported on September 21 that Ukrainian forces have breached the main Russian defensive line in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast with armored vehicles, citing an unnamed Ukrainian officer serving in the area.[6] *WSJ* also reported that Ukrainian forces have advanced to the edge of Novoprokopivka (16km south of Orikhiv), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this report as of this publication.[7]

**Russian forces currently defending in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast have been unable to prevent Ukrainian forces from making gradual but steady advances since mid-August.** ISW has consistently observed Ukrainian forces making slow but regular advances in

western Zaporizhia Oblast despite the Russian military's lateral redeployment of elements of relatively elite units to reinforce Russian defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[8] The Russian military laterally redeployed elements of the 7th Guards Mountain Airborne (VDV) Division and the 76th Guards VDV Division to the Robotyne area in mid-August to repel Ukrainian attacks and possibly to relieve elements of the 22nd and 45th Separate Spetsnaz Brigades that had been counterattacking against Ukrainian advances during the earlier phases of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.[9] Geolocated footage published on September 20 and 21 shows elements of the 22nd Guards Spetsnaz Brigade operating west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv), suggesting that the Russian command has tactically transferred elements of the 22nd Guards Spetsnaz Brigade to support VDV elements already observed defending in the area.[10] A Ukrainian soldier defending in southern Ukraine told the *WSJ* in an article published on September 21 that Russian troops defending front-line trenches are "poor-quality," but that counterattacking assault troops are "stronger." [11] The Ukrainian soldier's statements are consistent with ISW's observations that relatively elite Russian Spetsnaz and VDV elements appear to be the primary counterattack elements in western Zaporizhia Oblast.

**Ukrainian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes targeting the Russian airfield near occupied Saky, Crimea, and may have damaged Russian aircraft.** The Department of Strategic Communications of the Ukrainian Armed Forces stated that Ukrainian forces launched a combined attack on the Russian airfield near Saky (60km north of Sevastopol).[12] *Suspilne Crimea* reported that sources in the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) stated that the SBU and the Ukrainian Navy launched drones to overwhelm Russian air defense systems near the airfield and then conducted strikes with Neptune missiles.[13] Twelve Russian combat aircraft including Su-24 and Su-30 fighter-bombers, were reportedly present at the time of the strikes, and *Suspilne's* SBU sources stated that strikes caused unspecified serious damage at the airfield.[14] ISW has yet to observe footage detailing the consequences of the Ukrainian strike, however. Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Russian air defenses downed up to 19 Ukrainian drones over the Black Sea and Crimea on the night of September 20 to 21 but did not acknowledge any Ukrainian missile strikes.[15] Russia's Black Sea Fleet manages the Saky airfield, which is the latest Black Sea Fleet target that Ukrainian forces have struck.

**Satellite imagery confirms that Ukrainian forces also struck the 744th Communications Center of the Command of the Black Sea Fleet in occupied Crimea on September 20 as part of an apparent Ukrainian effort to target Black Sea Fleet facilities.**[16] The imagery shows that the Ukrainian strikes destroyed a significant portion of the command post near Verkhnosadove (16km northeast of Sevastopol).[17] Ukrainian forces have increasingly targeted Black Sea Fleet naval assets in and around Crimea in recent weeks, including a strike that destroyed a Ropucha-class landing ship and a Kilo-class submarine and damaged the Sevmorzavod naval repair facility in Sevastopol.[18] Russia's Black Sea Fleet is an element of the Russian navy subordinate to the Southern Military District (SMD), but commands air and ground units in occupied Crimea and elsewhere along the front in Ukraine in addition to its naval vessels. Elements of the Black Sea Fleet's 810th Naval Infantry Brigade are engaged in critical defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and the Black Sea Fleet's 22nd Army Corps is defending positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast.[19] The Black Sea Fleet's control of the Saky airfield gives it charge of ground-based aircraft in addition to its naval-based assets. The Black Sea Fleet appears to be heavily responsible for maintaining Russian logistics from Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea to the Russian grouping in southern Ukraine, especially since Ukrainian strikes have complicated Russian ground lines of

communications (GLOCs) in the area.[20] Russian forces routinely launch drone and missile strikes from Black Sea Fleet assets and within the Black Sea Fleet's area of responsibility in occupied Crimea and Krasnodar Krai.[21] The Black Sea Fleet is the only formal structure of the Russian military that has had a long-term presence in occupied Ukraine as it has been headquartered in Sevastopol since before Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014. The Black Sea Fleet is more than its naval assets, and the Ukrainian attacks on the Black Sea Fleet will likely achieve effects beyond the degradation of Russian naval capabilities.

**Russian forces conducted a notably large series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 20 to 21, likely to correspond with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the United States.** Ukrainian sources reported on September 21 that Russian forces launched 44 Kh-101/Kh-555/Kh-55 cruise missiles targeting Ukrainian energy, industrial, and civilian infrastructure in Kyiv City, Cherkasy City, and Lviv City.[22] Ukrainian air defenses reportedly intercepted 38 Russian cruise missiles.[23] Ukrainian sources also reported that Russian forces launched six S-300 missiles at Kharkiv City.[24] Ukrainian Commander-in Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated that Russian forces launched the missiles in several waves from different directions and that the missiles changed course along their routes.[25] Russian milbloggers amplified photos and footage claiming to show the aftermath of Russian missile strikes throughout Ukraine.[26] Russian forces have not conducted a comparably large-scale missile strike since the night of August 29 to 30, when Russian forces launched 28 cruise missiles against Ukraine.[27]

**The Kremlin continues to seek to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative.** The export of Ukrainian grain along European land routes has emerged as an area of tension between Ukraine and its European partners since Russia's withdrawal from the initiative in July and its attacks on Ukrainian port infrastructure since then, and ISW has previously assessed that Russian strikes on Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure are part of a Russian campaign to damage Ukrainian relations with its Western neighbors.[28] Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki announced on September 20 that Poland would focus on building up its own weapons arsenals and would no longer transfer weapons to Ukraine.[29] The Polish and Ukrainian Ministers of Agrarian Policy agreed on September 21 to work together to find a solution regarding the export of Ukrainian agricultural products in the coming days, however.[30]

**The Russian State Duma will reportedly propose a bill allowing the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to include volunteer formations amid continued rumors about the Wagner Group operating alongside Rosgvardia.** Russian Chairperson of the State Duma Committee on Information Policy Alexander Khinshtein announced that members of the State Duma and Federation Council plan to introduce a bill on September 22 that would allow for the inclusion of volunteer formations within Rosgvardia.[31] Khinshtein stated that the bill would extend all previously established powers and mechanisms of the Russian MoD to Rosgvardia as Rosgvardia performs tasks in the war in Ukraine similar to those of the Russian MoD.[32] Khinshtein claimed that the Russian president will make decisions regarding Rosgvardia volunteer formations.[33] ISW previously reported that Russian sources claimed that some Wagner Group personnel are working closely with Rosgvardia in order to rejoin the war in Ukraine.[34] A Russian milblogger claimed on September 18 that Rosgvardia Director Viktor Zolotov met with the son of deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, Pavel Prigozhin, and Wagner commander Anton Yelizarov (known under the callsign "Lotos") and discussed the "preservation" of Wagner.[35] Russian opposition media,

insider sources, and milbloggers have claimed that Yevgeny Prigozhin left his assets to Pavel Prigozhin and that Pavel Prigozhin will take over the management of Wagner.[36]

**The Kremlin is reportedly pushing propaganda narratives that highlight Russian artillery and aviation while downplaying the efforts of Russian forces conducting ground operations, likely in order to avoid discussion of Russian personnel losses and poor counterbattery capabilities.** Russian opposition news outlet *Meduza* reported on September 21 that the Russian Presidential Administration distributed a manual on September 19 instructing Kremlin-affiliated media to highlight Ukrainian equipment and personnel losses and emphasize that Russian artillery fire and air strikes are effectively suppressing Ukrainian offensive actions.[37] ISW has routinely observed Russian units actively engaged in ground assaults, and the Russian information space has repeatedly complained about Russian forces' poor counterbattery capabilities.[38]

**The Kremlin is likely aiming to blame Armenian leadership and the West for Azerbaijan's recent military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh.** The Russian Presidential Administration's manual also reportedly advised Kremlin-affiliated media to blame the West and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan for recognizing Azerbaijani sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh.[39] The manual also advised state media to emphasize Russian peacekeepers' role in "evacuating civilians." [40] The Russian government is likely attempting to portray Pashinyan's leadership poorly after a series of statements criticizing Armenia's ties to Russia.[41]

#### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Ukrainian armored vehicles are operating beyond the final line of the Russian defensive layer that Ukrainian forces in western Zaporizhia Oblast are currently penetrating, although ISW is not yet prepared to assess that Ukrainian forces have broken fully through this Russian defensive layer.**
- **Russian forces currently defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast have been unable to prevent Ukrainian forces from making gradual but steady advances since mid-August.**
- **Ukrainian forces conducted a series of drone and missile strikes targeting the Russian airfield near occupied Saky, Crimea, and may have damaged Russian aircraft.**
- **Satellite imagery confirms that Ukrainian forces also struck the 744th Communications Center of the Command of the Black Sea Fleet in occupied Crimea on September 20 as part of an apparent Ukrainian effort to target Black Sea Fleet facilities.**
- **Russian forces conducted a notably large series of missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of September 20 to 21, likely to correspond with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's visit to the United States.**
- **The Kremlin continues to seek to intensify divisions between Ukraine and its Central European partners following Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative.**
- **The Russian State Duma will reportedly propose a bill allowing the Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) to include volunteer formations amid continued rumors about the Wagner Group operating alongside Rosgvardia.**



- **The Kremlin is reportedly pushing propaganda narratives that highlight Russian artillery and aviation while downplaying the efforts of Russian forces conducting ground operations, likely in order to avoid discussion of Russian personnel losses and poor counterbattery capabilities.**
- **The Kremlin is likely aiming to blame Armenian leadership and the West for Azerbaijan's recent military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not advance.**

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



***We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 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

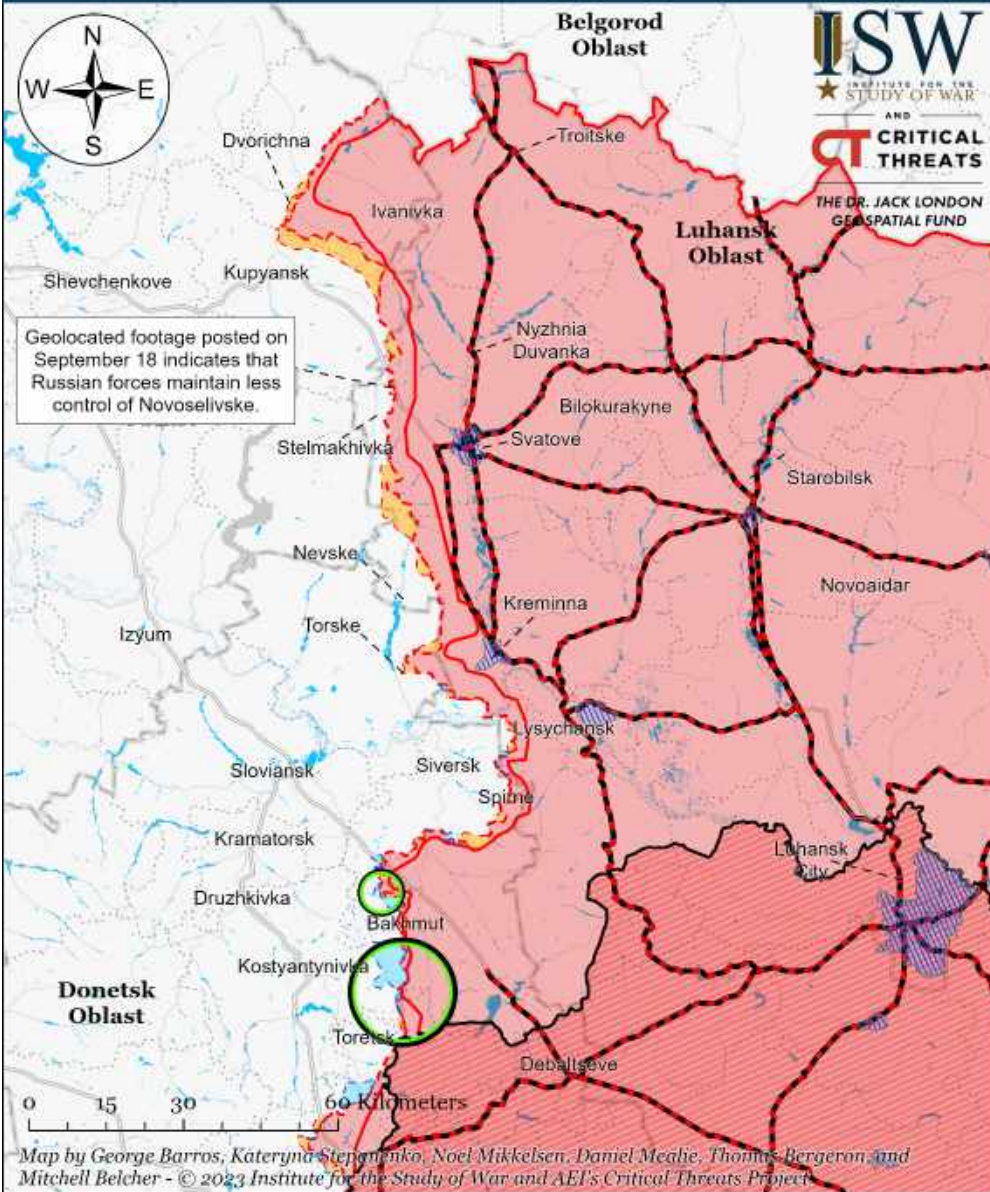
### **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

#### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

Russian forces reportedly continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line but did not make any confirmed advances on September 21. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces attacked in the direction of Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) and Synkivka (9km northeast of Kupyansk) but did not specify an outcome.[42] Geolocated footage published on September 21 shows that elements of the Russian 25th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (6th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) are operating near Synkivka.[43] Another Russian milblogger claimed on September 20 that unspecified Russian Airborne (VDV) units have been pushing Ukrainian forces from positions in the forests west of Kreminna over the past week.[44] Ukrainian Deputy Director of the Department of Application Planning of the Main Directorate of the Ukrainian National Guard Colonel Mykola Urshalovych stated on September 21 that Russian forces are reinforcing forward tank and assault units in the Kupyansk and Lyman directions.[45]

Ukrainian forces reportedly continued ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line on September 21 but did not make any confirmed advances. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces regained previously lost positions in Novoselivske (14km northwest of Svatove).[46] The Russian MoD claimed that elements of the Russian Central Grouping of Forces repelled three Ukrainian attacks near Dibrova (7km southwest of Kreminna) and Shepylove (8km south of Kreminna) in Luhansk Oblast.[47] Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik claimed that Russian forces, including elements of the LNR 2nd Army Corps, repelled 15 Ukrainian attacks against Russian positions in Luhansk Oblast over the past week.[48]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of September 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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STUDY OF WAR  
AND  
**CRITICAL  
THREATS**  
THE DR. JACK LONDON  
GEOSPATIAL FUND

- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

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

Note: Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces captured two square kilometers over the past week and 51 square kilometers near Bakhmut since the beginning of the counteroffensive.

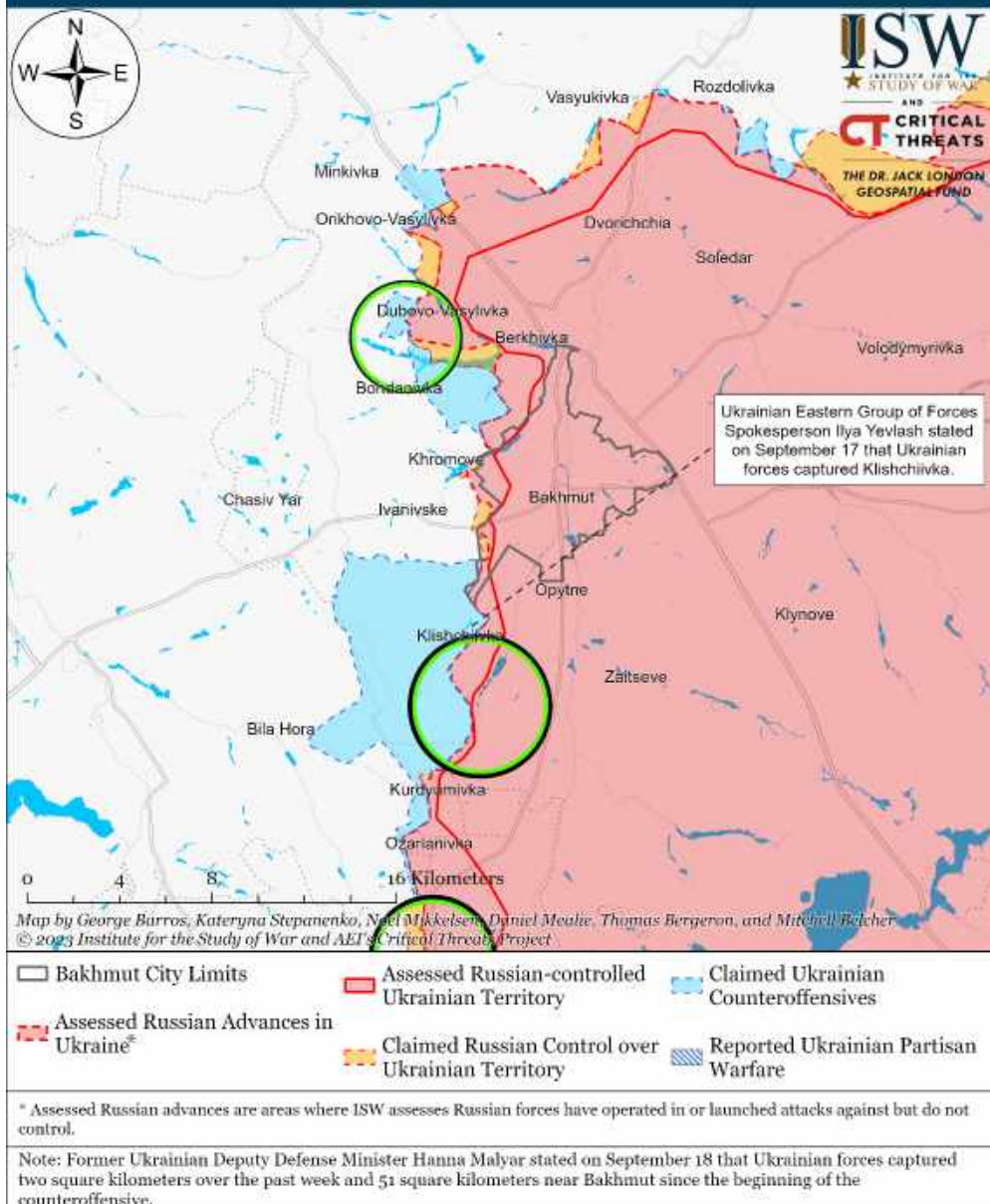


**Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)**

Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut on September 21 and reportedly advanced. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Ilya Yevlash stated on September 21 that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success near Odradivka (9km south of Bakhmut), Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and Kurdyumivka (12km southwest of Bakhmut).[49] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued assault operations south of Bakhmut.[50] Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting is ongoing along the Klishchiivka-Ozaryanivka line (7-14km southwest of Bakhmut) line and that a meeting engagement occurred near Berkhivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut).[51] Yevlash stated that Ukrainian positions near Andriivka and Klishchiivka allow Ukrainian forces to bring artillery closer to the T0513 (Bakhmut-Horlivka) highway making it more difficult for Russian forces to use this GLOC. [52]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Bakhmut on September 21 but did not advance. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Zaitseve (it's unclear if the Ukrainian General Staff was referring to the Zaitseve 6km southeast of Bakhmut or the Zaitseve 13km south of Bakhmut), northeast of Hryhorivka (9km northwest of Bakhmut), and northeast and east of Andriivka.[53] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces counterattacked near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.[54]

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of September 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on September 21 but did not advance. Ukrainian military officials stated that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive operations in the Avdiivka direction, near Marinka (on the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City), and Krasnohorivka (directly west of Donetsk City).[55] A Russian milblogger also acknowledged that Russian forces unsuccessfully conducted assaults in Marinka.[56]

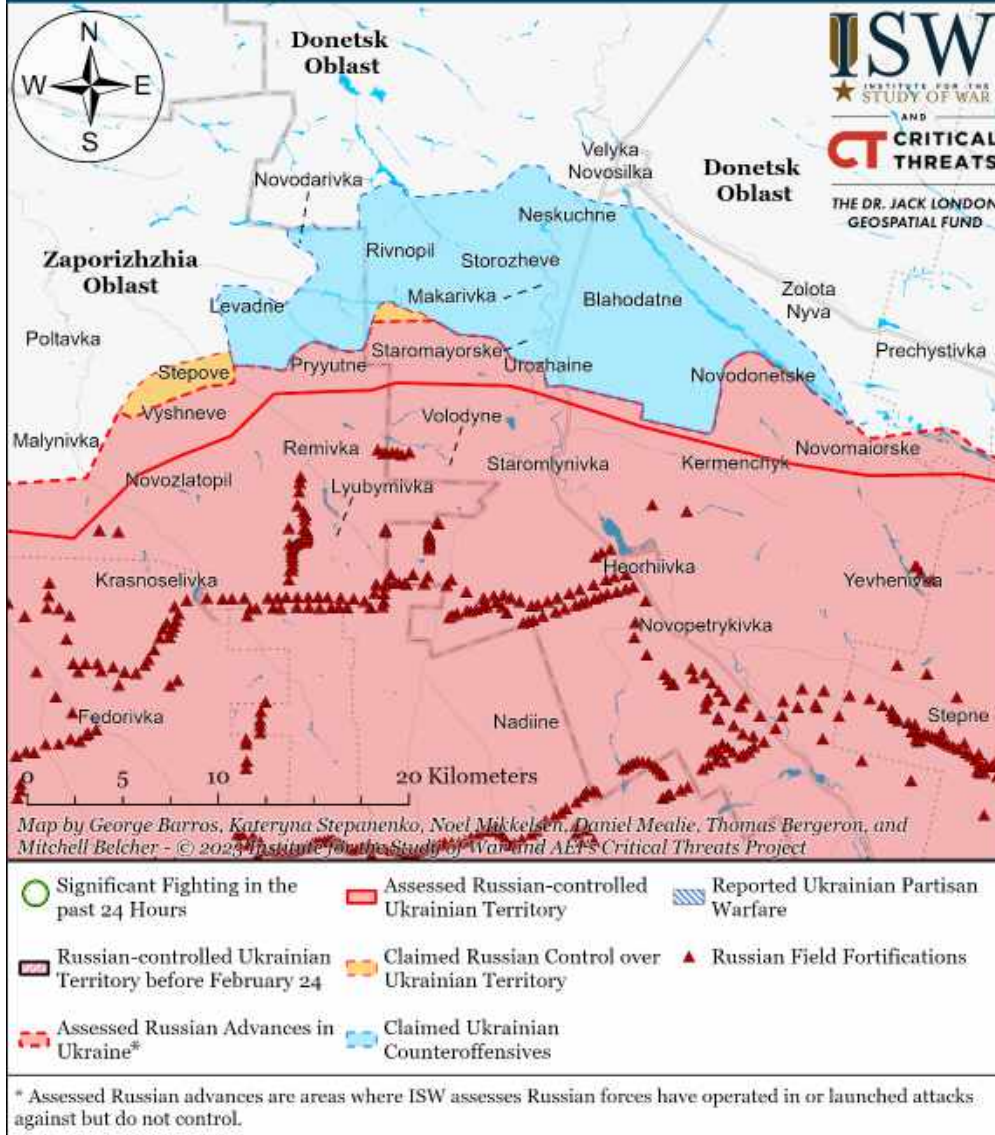
### **Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)**

The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Mykilske (4km southeast of Vuhledar) in western Donetsk Oblast on September 21.[57]

Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area but did not advance on September 21. Russian sources, including the Russian MoD, claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Pryyutne (16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[58] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted a reconnaissance-in-force operation near Staromayorske.[59] Another Russian milblogger claimed that fighting is ongoing north of Zavitne Bazhannya (12km south of Velyka Novosilka).[60]

A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces counterattacked east of Zavitne Bazhannya near the Mokri Yaly river and the T0518 (Velyka Novosilka to Nikolske) highway in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area on September 19, but did not specify an outcome.[61]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around the Vremivka Salient as of September 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

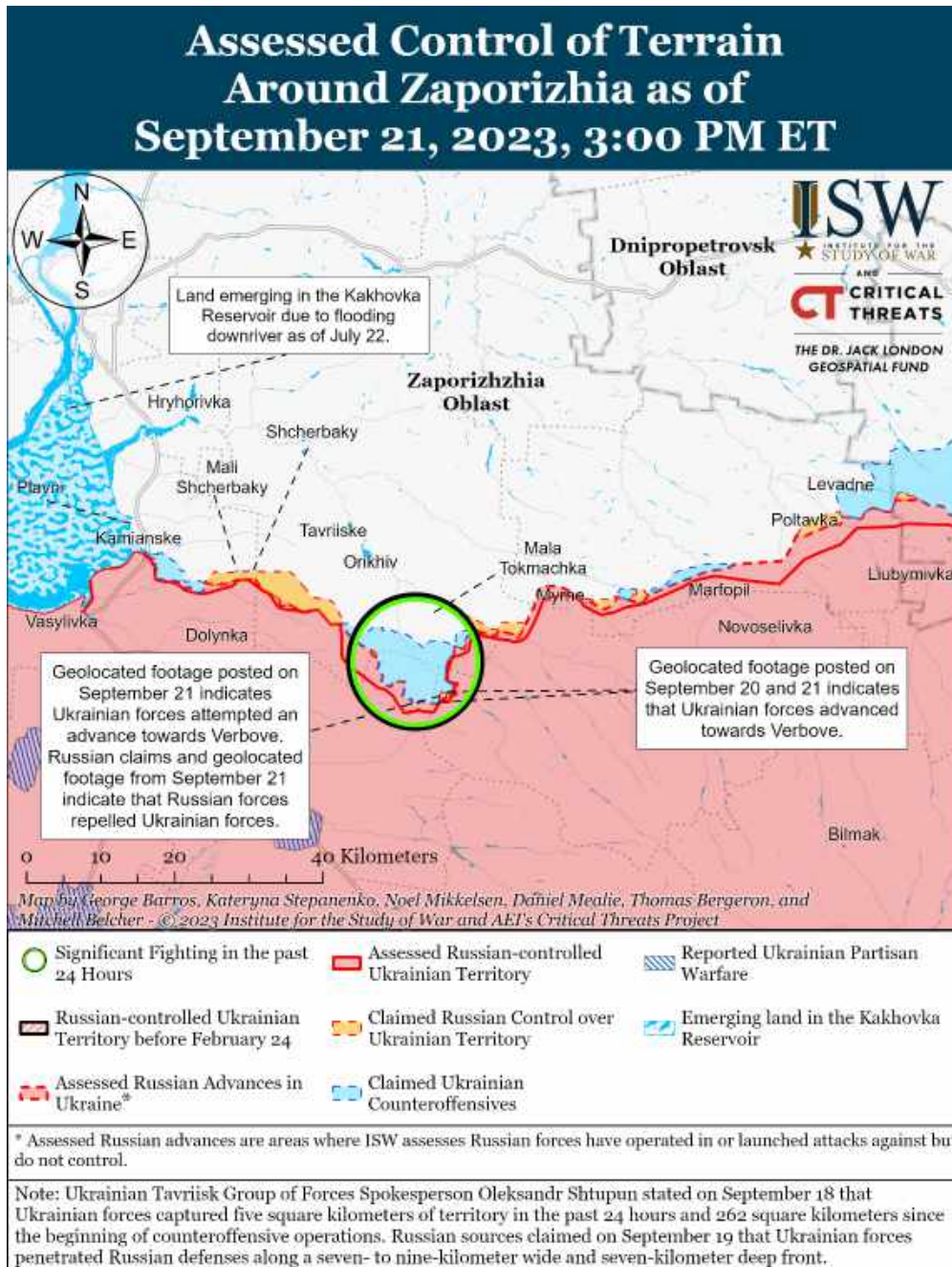


Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on September 21 and advanced. Geolocated footage published on September 20 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced southwest and west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[62] Ukrainian Director of the Planning Department of the Main Directorate of the National Guard Colonel Mykola Urshalovych stated on September 21 that Ukrainian forces have achieved unspecified successes, advanced into Russian defenses, and continue to push Russian forces out of their positions in southern Ukraine, likely in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast.[63] A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces advanced one kilometer between Novopokrovka (16km southeast of Orikhiv) and Verbove and controlled the No8 (Polohy-Voskresenka) highway.[64] Russian sources, including the Russian MoD, claimed on

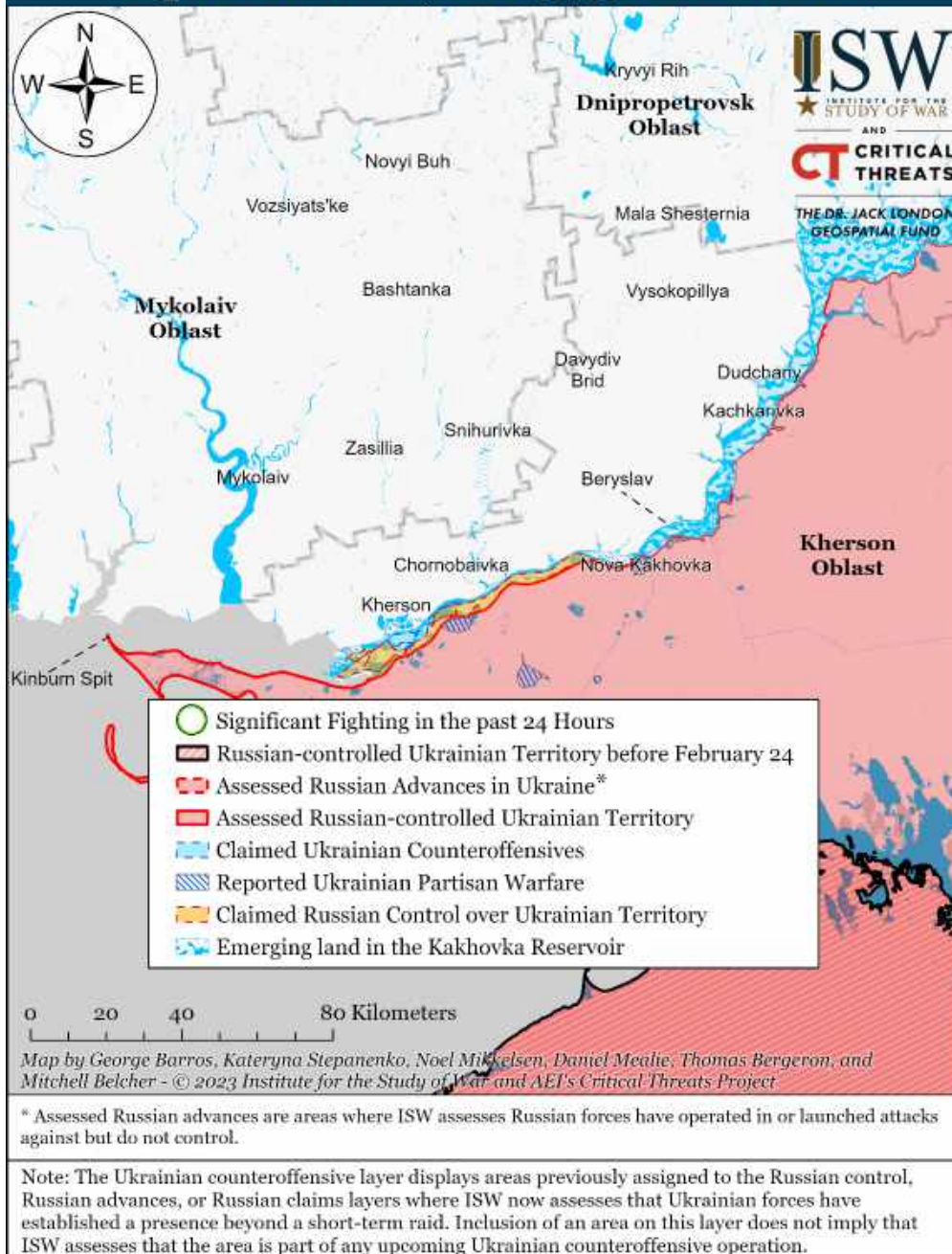


September 20 and 21 that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv), and Verbove.[65]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not advance on September 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Robotyne.[66] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian 108th Air Assault (VDV) Regiment (7th VDV Division) are operating in the Orikhiv area.[67]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 21, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Ukrainian officials reported on September 21 that Russian occupation officials continued forced mobilization efforts in occupied Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian

occupation officials are handing out summonses to men ages 18 through 60 in occupied Myrnohor, Kherson Oblast.[68] Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration Head Yuri Malashko stated that Russian occupation officials have increased mobilization efforts in occupied territories since the conclusion of regional elections.[69] Luhansk Oblast Military Administration Head Artem Lysohor stated that Russian occupation police are actively identifying male residents who are on military registration lists.[70]

A Russian milblogger claimed on September 21 that Russian forces in an unspecified sector of the front received a batch of modernized Msta-S howitzers with improved tactical and technical characteristics.[71] The milblogger claimed that Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec produces the Msta-S systems.[72] The milblogger claimed that the system can hit targets with several different types of projectiles along different trajectories which, he argued, will allow Russian forces to evade retaliatory strikes.[73] It is unclear at what scale the Russian forces in Ukraine are receiving these modified howitzer systems.

**Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

Nothing significant to report.

**Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

Belarusian forces will conduct training exercises in Belarus from September 22 to 26. Ukrainian and Belarusian military sources stated on September 21 that Belarusian military and territorial defense forces will conduct training exercises at five training grounds in Mogilev, Brest, Grodno, and Minsk oblasts.[74]

**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.**

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<https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1704827240389681597> ; <https://t.me/radiosvoboda/47937>  
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[64] <https://t.me/DnevnikDesantnika/3235> ; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1704845847953895815>

[65] [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30689](https://t.me/mod_russia/30689) ; [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30692](https://t.me/mod_russia/30692) ; <https://t.me/wargonzo/15181> ; <https://t.me/readovkanews/66401> ; <https://t.me/DnevnikDesantnika/3235> ; <https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1704845847953895815> ; [https://t.me/multi\\_XAM/801](https://t.me/multi_XAM/801)

[66] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidosTwou8R9t47PBtfKiabVC3ajWjv7G3veycRjfWgPDEkqbhi53RozbUkzJJvpPUK9l> ; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02FAGJaGUQZAH2shsmW72GsEPKCq7M4vxE7ao5FCdDaEiyymf5vLJLHEFDF4CmLfqMl>

[67] [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/25976](https://t.me/dva_majors/25976)

[68] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02KDHVoeJWFQLWr9Dbw6BXYCRCo707hrQ27tDLAepoS3YADQuqXXiH1mtSH8dPGaaql>

[69] [https://t.me/zoda\\_gov\\_ua/22653](https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/22653)

[70] <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/13775>

[71] <https://t.me/epoddubny/17482>

[72] <https://t.me/epoddubny/17482>

[73] <https://t.me/epoddubny/17482>

[74] <https://www.facebook.com/JointForcesCommandAFU/posts/pfbidor6SXDayE2ZcrvQLAbnkWjntJ7THPswJAT2LqtAxaFw56SwfXJAvG6gq8UYzZ6XFql> ; <https://www.facebook.com/JointForcesCommandAFU/posts/pfbid02ySuTbnJysyjTFR7AWuaAZHB5QGM9uxqVwtrJiYfFfaopd3axKZSe8KzEPX16Q2rBl> ; <https://t.me/modmilby/32231> ; <https://t.me/modmilby/32230>



# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 20, 2023

Grace Mappes, Nicole Wolkov, Angelica Evans,  
Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan

September 20, 2023, 8:30pm ET

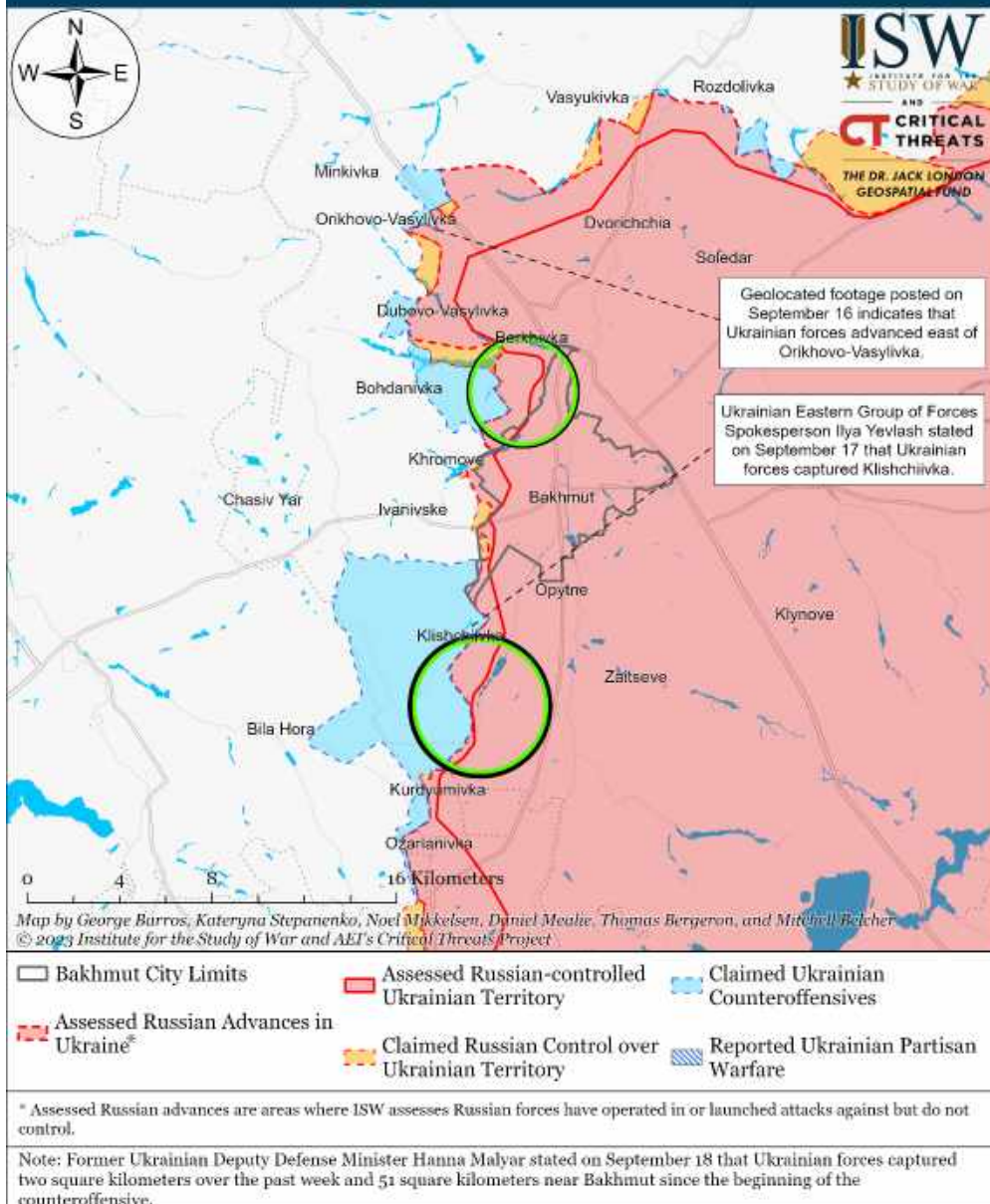
Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

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 2:00pm ET on September 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.**

**Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 20.** The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations and inflicted significant losses on Russian manpower and equipment in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhia Oblast) direction.[1] The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions in the Bakhmut direction and are consolidating in newly secured lines.[2] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed that Ukrainian forces secured positions in Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut) and that Russian redeployments of airborne (VDV) forces from Bakhmut to the Zaporizhia direction have weakened Russian defenses around Bakhmut.[3] ISW had previously observed elements of the 83rd Separate Air Assault Brigade operating in Zaporizhia, although it is unclear how large a proportion of that unit was redeployed from Bakhmut.[4] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that Ukrainian forces are preparing defensive positions before Russian forces renew their assaults in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction.[5]

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of September 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



**Russian servicemen and milbloggers revealed that the Russian military command orders Russian troops to carry out “ill-conceived and unsupported” counterattacks on Bakhmut’s southern flank to urgently regain lost ground.[6]** Elements of Altai Krai’s 1st Battalion of the 1442nd Regiment (a mobilized unit) published a video appeal in which the soldiers claim that they abandoned their military equipment in the Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) area after receiving an order from the Russian military command to form an assault group and attack in the Bakhmut direction.[7] The servicemen noted that the Russian military command began deploying different types of personnel to the frontlines — including soldiers who are currently resting

in the rear — without providing them with enough functional artillery shells. The servicemen noted that their shells do not explode when fired, which is likely a symptom of Russia's defense industrial base's (DIB) efforts to speed up the production of shells and skipping quality assurance measures to do so.[8] The servicemen added that the unit is suffering from low morale after hearing reports that Ukrainian forces destroyed most of an unspecified Russian regiment and almost an entire retreating assault group in the area. The servicemen also claimed that they do not have prepared defensive positions and have to rely on small arms whereas the Ukrainians have artillery. Relatives of the personnel in the 1442nd Regiment had previously appealed to Russian President Vladimir Putin after the Russian military command beat the troops for refusing to carry out an assault on September 14.[9]

A Russian milblogger also accused the Russian military command of ordering Russian troops to recapture Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut) and the surrounding area without setting proper conditions for such counterattacks.[10] The milblogger claimed that the Russian military command was planning “weak” counterattacks and failed to provide accurate intelligence to Russian assault units. The milblogger observed that Russian forces also lack artillery support, while “hysterical” counterattacks are depleting Russian resources and reserves. The milblogger also claimed that Russian defenses on the adjacent heights in the Andriivka area had collapsed, and it is likely that the Russian military command's efforts to regain lost positions are preventing Russian forces from preparing new defensive positions on Bakhmut's southern flank.

**Russian forces conducted another round of Shahed drones strikes against Ukraine overnight on September 19-20.** Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 17 of 24 launched Iranian-made Shahed 136/131 drones in Sumy, Poltava, Kirovohrad, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts and that some of the drones struck an oil refinery in Poltava Oblast.[11] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reiterated that Russian forces have predictably increased the use of drones against Ukraine because Russia can obtain, manufacture, or assemble more drones domestically.[12] Ihnat stated that Russian forces have not changed their drone tactics and continue attempts to bypass Ukrainian air defenses.

**A Russian milblogger outlined Russian reconnaissance groups' drone operator training and operation tactics in Ukraine.** The milblogger claimed that most Russian reconnaissance groups have two types of drone operators — a Mavik drone operator who carries out reconnaissance operations and a first-person viewer (FPV) drone operator who conducts attacks.[13] The milblogger noted that Mavik drone operators usually adjust fire and direct ground and drone attacks, while FPV drone operators strike targets that the Mavik drone operators identify.[14] The milblogger claimed that competent Mavik operators will train for up to six months while FPV drone operators train for three months, but noted that the battlefield effectiveness of drones is contingent upon their operators' skill.[15] The milblogger noted that Russian reconnaissance group commanders do not need approval from senior commanders to strike targets.[16] The milblogger also claimed that the Russian military is training fewer FPV drone operators due to the time and money needed for FPV drone repair, assembly, and operator training.[17] ISW has not observed a decrease in reconnaissance and FPV drone usage, however. The milblogger may be claiming that the Russian military is decreasing drone usage due to high costs in order to generate monetary and drone donations.[18]

**Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that unspecified saboteurs damaged Russian strategic aircraft at Chkalovsky airfield near Moscow on**

**September 18.[19]** The GUR reported on September 20 that the saboteurs planted explosives on an An-148 and an Il-20 aircraft subordinate to the Russian 354th Special Purpose Aviation Regiment and an Mi-28N helicopter that Russian forces use to repel Ukrainian drones. The GUR stated that the explosions severely damaged the aircraft, including the Mi-28N's tail, and inflicted minor damage on a second An-148 nearby. Russian authorities have not yet reported an attack at the Chkalovsky airfield as of September 20.

**Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on September 20 that he is in good health amidst continued speculations about his possible illness or death.** Ramzan Kadyrov directly addressed speculations about his health in a social media post on September 20 claiming that he remains alive and in good health.[20] Kadyrov claimed to not understand why speculations of his health necessitate “fuss” and stated that publications that speculate on his health are untrustworthy. Kadyrov included a video of himself visiting his uncle Magomed Kadyrov in the hospital.

**Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu met with Iranian Chief of the General Staff Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran, Iran to discuss Russian-Iranian military cooperation on September 19, a day after Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi denied Iran’s provision of drones to Russia.** Raisi denied that Iran provides drones to Russia during his speech to the United Nations on September 18.[21] Shoigu and Bagheri visited an Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Aerospace Force facility where Shoigu saw Iranian-made drones, air defense systems, missiles; and tactical, medium, and long-range missile systems on September 20.[22] Shoigu stated that Russia and Iran plan to implement a range of unspecified activities in spite of Western sanctions, likely in order to evade the sanctions.[23]

**Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized Russian peacekeepers’ humanitarian actions in Nagorno-Karabakh as the Russian information space continues to observe that Russia is losing influence in Armenia.** The Nagorno-Karabakh authorities accepted a Russian peacekeeper-mediated ceasefire agreement with Azerbaijan on September 20 and reported that Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijani officials will meet in Yevlakh, Azerbaijan on September 21 to discuss “reintegration” and “ensuring the rights and security of Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh.”[24] Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan stated that Armenian authorities were not involved in the ceasefire agreement and that Armenian forces were not present in Nagorno-Karabakh.[25] Putin emphasized on September 20 Russian peacekeepers’ roles in protecting civilians and claimed that Russia is in constant contact with Armenian, Azerbaijani and Nagorno-Karabakh authorities.[26]

The Russian MoD reported that Azerbaijani small arms fire killed Russian peacekeeping personnel driving in Nagorno-Karabakh and that Russian and Azerbaijani investigative authorities are working to clarify the incident.[27] Several milbloggers noted that the Russian military did not respond when Azerbaijani forces shot down a Russian Mi-24 helicopter during the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh war and expressed irritation at the assumption that the Russian military would similarly ignore these deaths.[28] Russian milbloggers continue to lament Russia’s waning influence in Armenia.[29] Russia’s role as a security guarantor for Armenia may be declining as Russia continues to prioritize its military operations in Ukraine at the same time as the Armenian government increasingly expresses its dissatisfaction with its security ties to Russia.[30]

## **Key Takeaways:**

- **Ukrainian forces continued offensive actions near Bakhmut and in western Zaporizhia Oblast on September 20.**
- **Russian servicemen and milbloggers revealed that the Russian military command orders Russian troops to carry out “ill-conceived and unsupported” counterattacks on Bakhmut’s southern flank to urgently regain lost ground.**
- **Russian forces conducted another round of Shahed drone strikes against Ukraine overnight on September 19-20.**
- **A Russian milblogger outlined Russian reconnaissance groups’ drone operator training and operation tactics in Ukraine.**
- **Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that unspecified saboteurs damaged Russian strategic aircraft at Chkalovsky airfield near Moscow on September 18.**
- **Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on September 20 that he is in good health amidst continued speculations about his possible illness or death.**
- **Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu met with Iranian Chief of the General Staff Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran, Iran to discuss Russian-Iranian military cooperation on September 19, a day after Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi denied Iran’s provision of drones to Russia.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin emphasized Russian peacekeepers’ humanitarian actions in Nagorno-Karabakh as the Russian information space continues to observe that Russia is losing influence in Armenia.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make confirmed gains.**
- **The Russian Red Cross (RKK) indicated that the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, particularly partial mobilization efforts in autumn 2022, caused a decline in mental health among many Russians.**
- **Russian and occupation authorities continue efforts to deport Ukrainian children to Russia and integrate Ukrainian children into Russian culture.**



# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



***We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 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

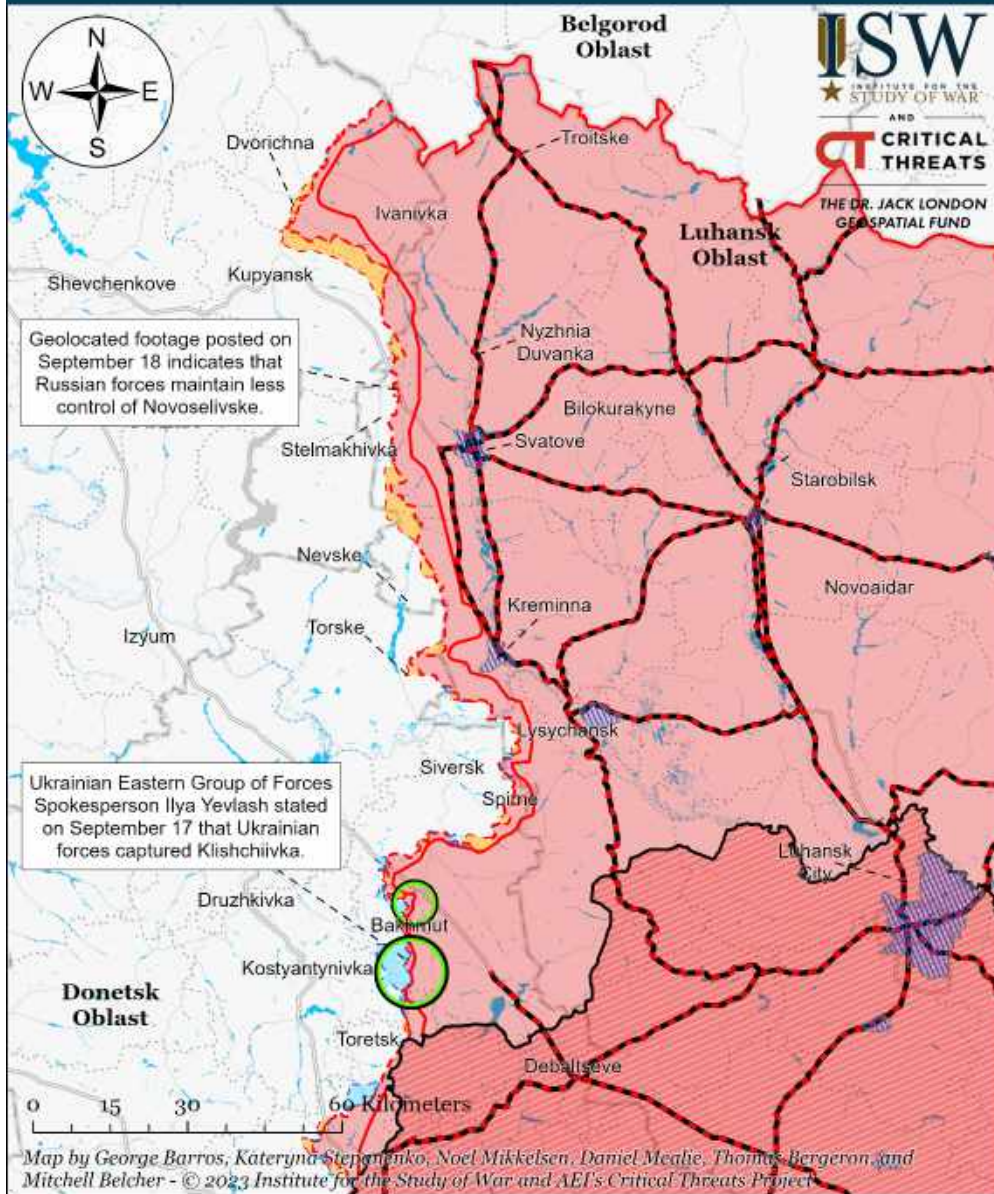
## **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove line on September 20 but did not make confirmed advances. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced near Novoyehorivka (16km southwest of Svatove) and established control over operationally significant heights near the settlement.[31] ISW has not observed evidence of this claim, however. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) and Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk).[32] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated on September 20 that Russian forces have infrequently conducted assaults in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction over the past week.[33] Yevlash also stated that 110,000 Russian frontline, rear, and support personnel are located in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction and that Russian forces accumulated this number of troops in an attempt to pin Ukrainian forces on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna frontline.[34] Footage published on September 20 purportedly shows artillery elements of the Russian 25th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (6th Combined Arms Army, Western Military District) operating in the Kupyansk direction and elements of the Russian 228th Motorized Rifle Regiment (90th Guards Tank Division, Central Military District) operating near Kreminna.[35]

The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Dibrova (7km southwest of Kreminna).[36]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of September 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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STUDY OF WAR  
AND  
**CRITICAL  
THREATS**  
THE DR. JACK LONDON  
GEOSPATIAL FUND

- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

Note: Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces captured two square kilometers over the past week and 51 square kilometers near Bakmut since the beginning of the counteroffensive.

## **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)**

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in Bakhmut but have not made confirmed territorial gains on September 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces are continuing to assault Russian positions south of Bakhmut and are entrenching themselves on newly achieved lines.[37] The UK Ministry of Defense (MoD) assessed that Ukrainian forces had secured Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), while Russian forces still control the railway line located between Klishchiivka and the T0513 highway to the east of the settlement.[38] The UK MoD added that recent redeployments of Russian VDV forces from the Bakhmut area to the Zaporizhia Oblast may have weakened the Russian defenses around Bakhmut. The Ukrainian 3rd Separate Mechanized Brigade reported on September 19 that Ukrainian forces were clearing the approaches to Andriivka.[39]

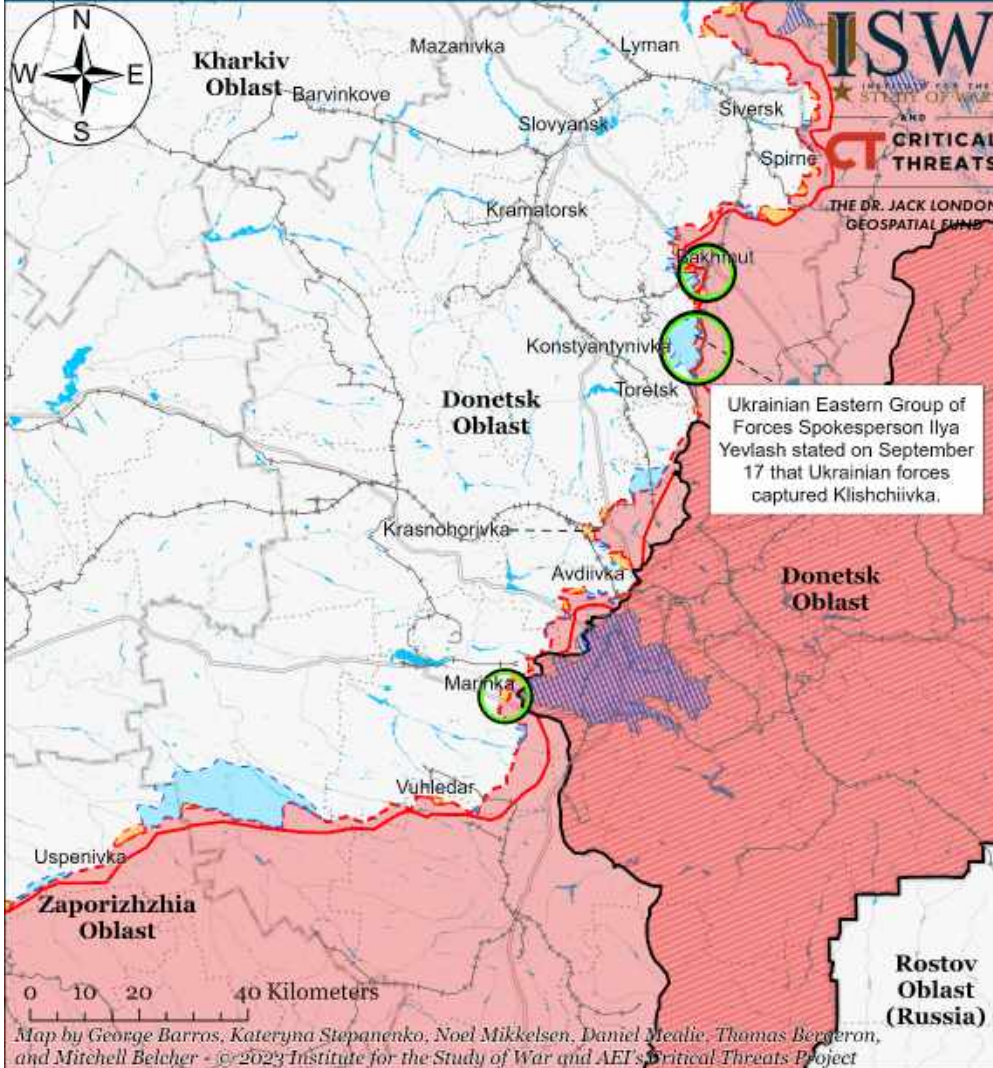
The Russian “Hispaniola” Volunteer Reconnaissance Assault Brigade – a volunteer formation composed of Russian radical soccer fans and operating in the Bakhmut direction – reported that Ukrainian forces struck the brigade’s headquarters near Svitlodarsk (20km southeast of Bakhmut City).[40] The “Hispaniola” Brigade added that the strike resulted in the destruction of the headquarters, the loss of several vehicles, and casualties. The “Hispaniola” Brigade claimed that it continues to fight in the Bakhmut direction, is deploying additional personnel, and is recruiting more volunteers.

Russian forces continued to counterattack Ukrainian positions on Bakhmut’s northern and southern flanks but did not advance on September 20. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian counterattacks northeast of Andriivka, near Yahidne just north of Bakhmut, and west of Zaitseve (it’s unclear if the Ukrainian General Staff was referring to the Zaitseve 6km southeast of Bakhmut or the Zaitseve 13km south of Bakhmut).[41] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger also claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully counterattacked near Andriivka and Klishchiivka.[42] Russian sources claimed that fighting is ongoing near Klishchiivka and that certain segments of the settlement remain contested as of September 20.[43] Another milblogger claimed that Russian forces carried out a successful counterattack in Klishchiivka and pushed Ukrainian forces from an unspecified part of the settlement but did not provide visual confirmation to support this claim.[44]

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made limited advances on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line. A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the “Yugra” battalion – composed of mobilized personnel from the Khanty-Mansi Okrug – seized unspecified Ukrainian positions in the Donetsk direction and were fiercely fighting in order to advance by 100 to 300 meters.[45] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued to unsuccessfully attack Ukrainian positions in the Marinka area, just west of Donetsk City.[46]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of September 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Major Railroads
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

Note: Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces captured two square kilometers over the past week and 51 square kilometers near Bakhmut since the beginning of the counteroffensive.

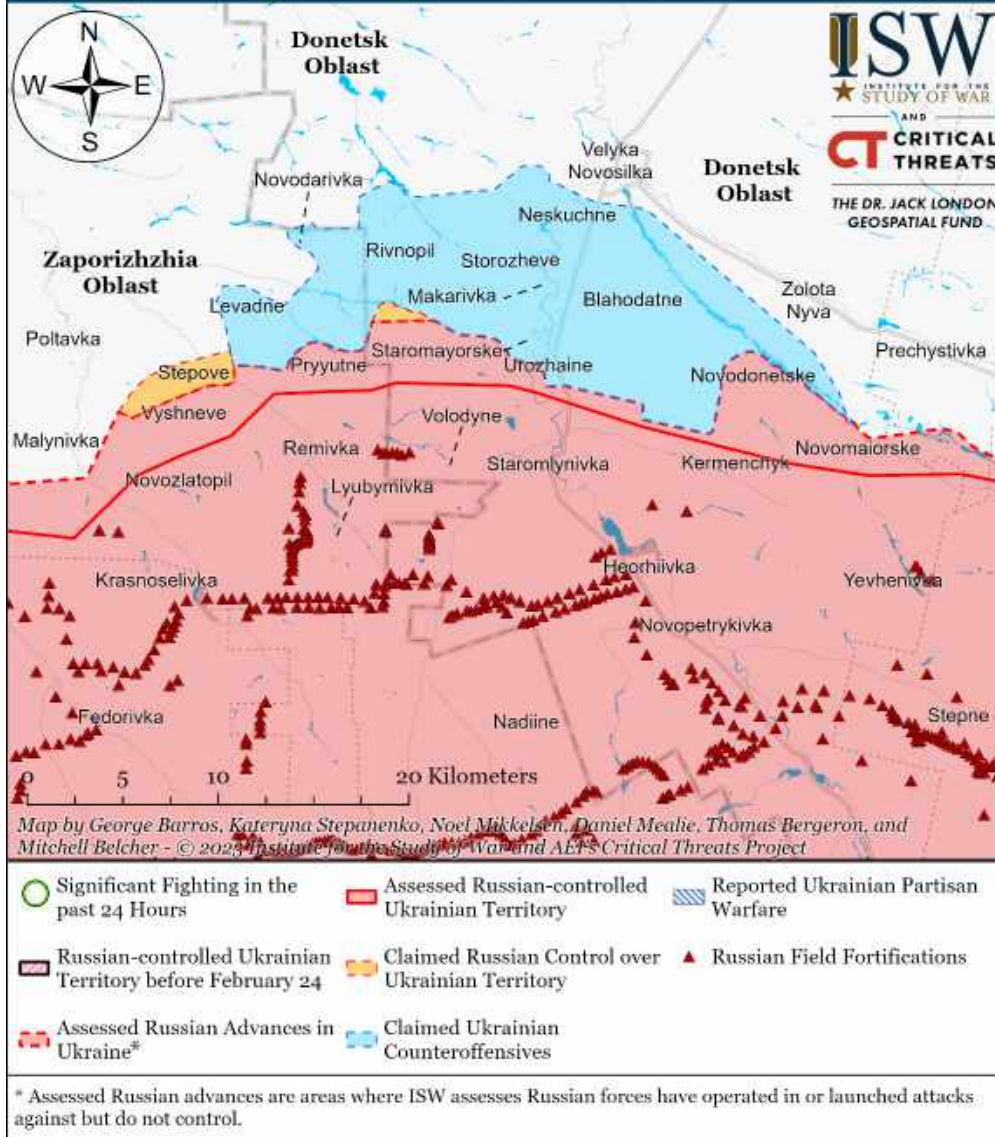


**Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)**

A Russian milblogger posted footage on September 20 claiming to show elements of the Russian 14th Guards Spetsnaz Brigade operating in the Vuhledar direction.[47]

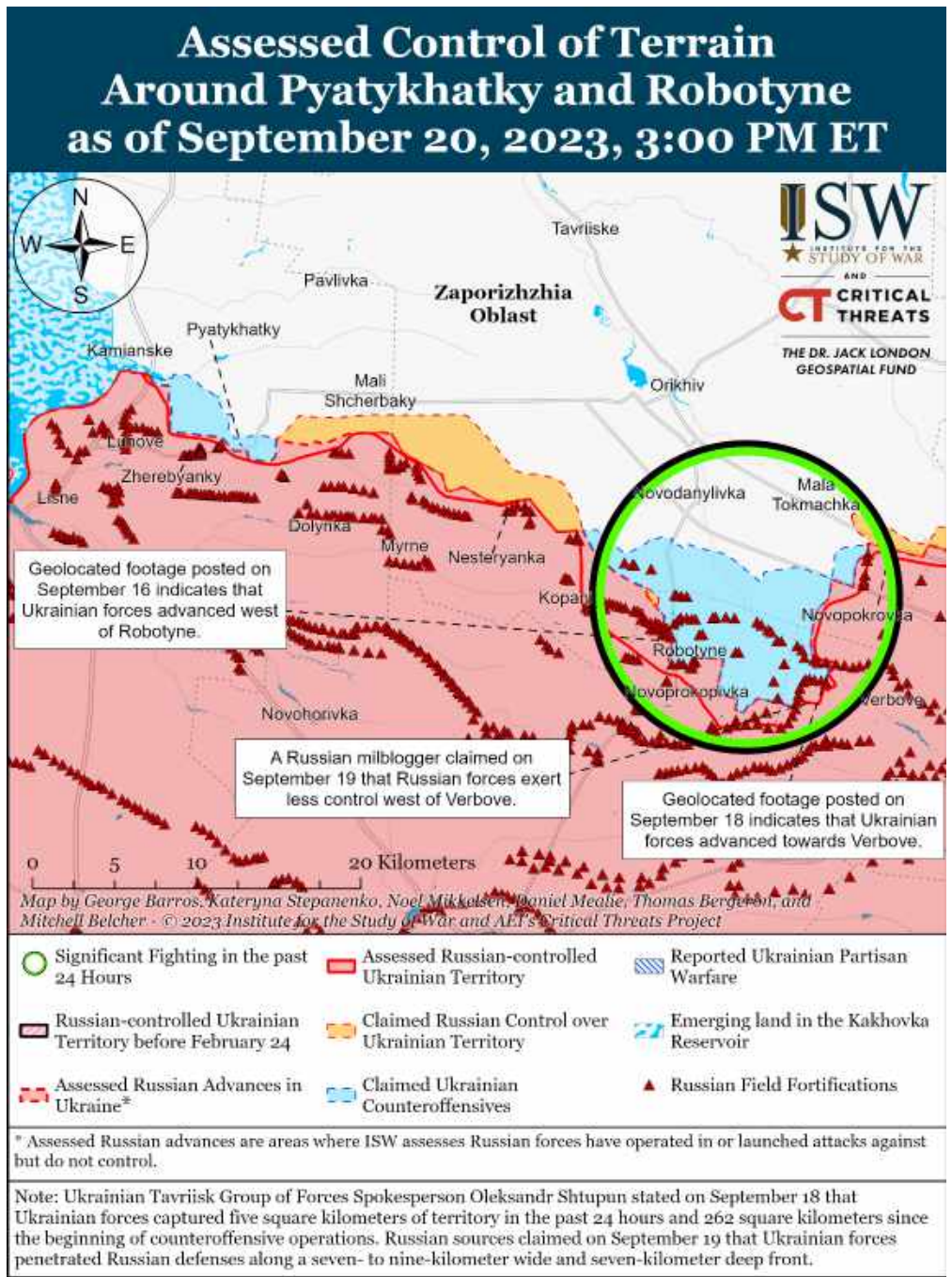
Ukrainian forces reportedly continued assaults in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on September 20 but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances. The Russian MoD claimed that elements of the Russian Eastern Grouping of Forces repelled a Ukrainian attack in the direction of Pryyutne (16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka) and stopped a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group near Novodonetske (12km southeast of Velyka Novosilka).[48] A Russian milblogger claimed that small groups of Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks north of Pryyutne and near Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) and retreated under Russian artillery fire.[49] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces withdrew from the outskirts of Staromayorske, likely reporting on the same Ukrainian retreat in the area.[50] Another Russian milblogger claimed on September 19 that Ukrainian forces are regrouping in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.[51] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on September 20 that Ukrainian forces continued defensive operations that caused Russian forces to suffer manpower and equipment losses in the Shakhtarske operational direction, presumably referring to the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.[52]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around the Vremivka Salient as of September 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on September 20 but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations and inflicted significant losses on Russian manpower and equipment in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhzhia Oblast) direction.[53] Russian sources, including the Russian MoD, claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Robotyne (12km south of Orikhiv) and Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv) and in the direction of Novoprokopivka (16km south of Orikhiv) and Kopani (12km southwest of Orikhiv).[54] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian and Ukrainian forces skirmished on Verbove's western outskirts.[55] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked near Robotyne on the night of September 19 to 20.[56] North Ossetian "Storm Ossetia" and "Alania" volunteer battalions, which are operating in

western Zaporizhzhia Oblast, claimed that the intensity of fighting decreased by the morning of September 20 near Robotyne and Verbove.[57] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces were advancing through the lowlands because Russian forces controlled the heights in this area.[58]

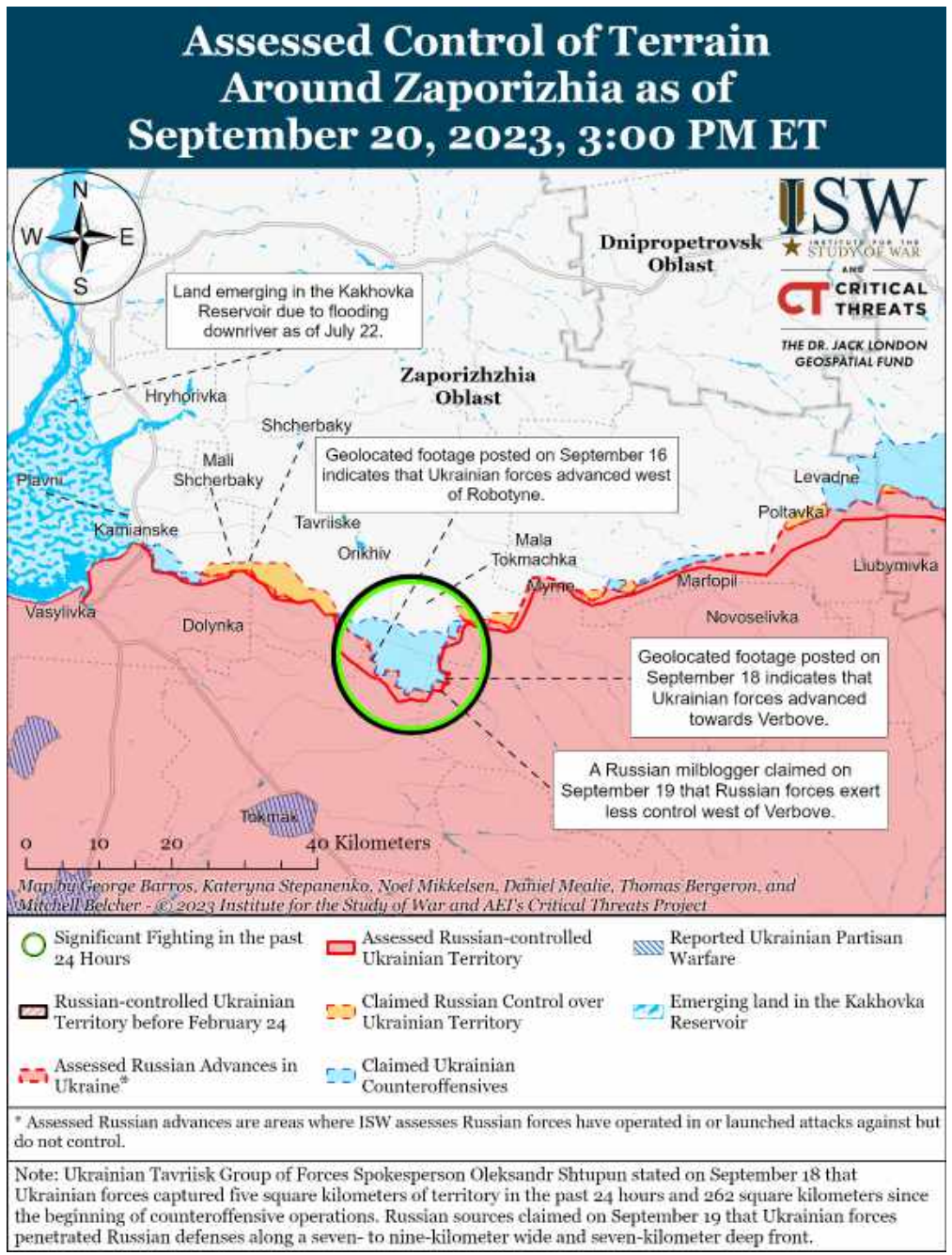


Russian forces continued ground attacks in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on September 20 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful attacks near Mala Tokmachka (7km southeast of Orikhiv), Novodanylivka (5km south of Orikhiv), and Robotyne.[59] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces counterattacked near Robotyne’s southern outskirts but did not specify an outcome.[60] North Ossetian “Storm Ossetia”



and “Alania” volunteer battalions claimed that elements of the Russian 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) captured a Ukrainian position west of Verbove on September 19.[61] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.

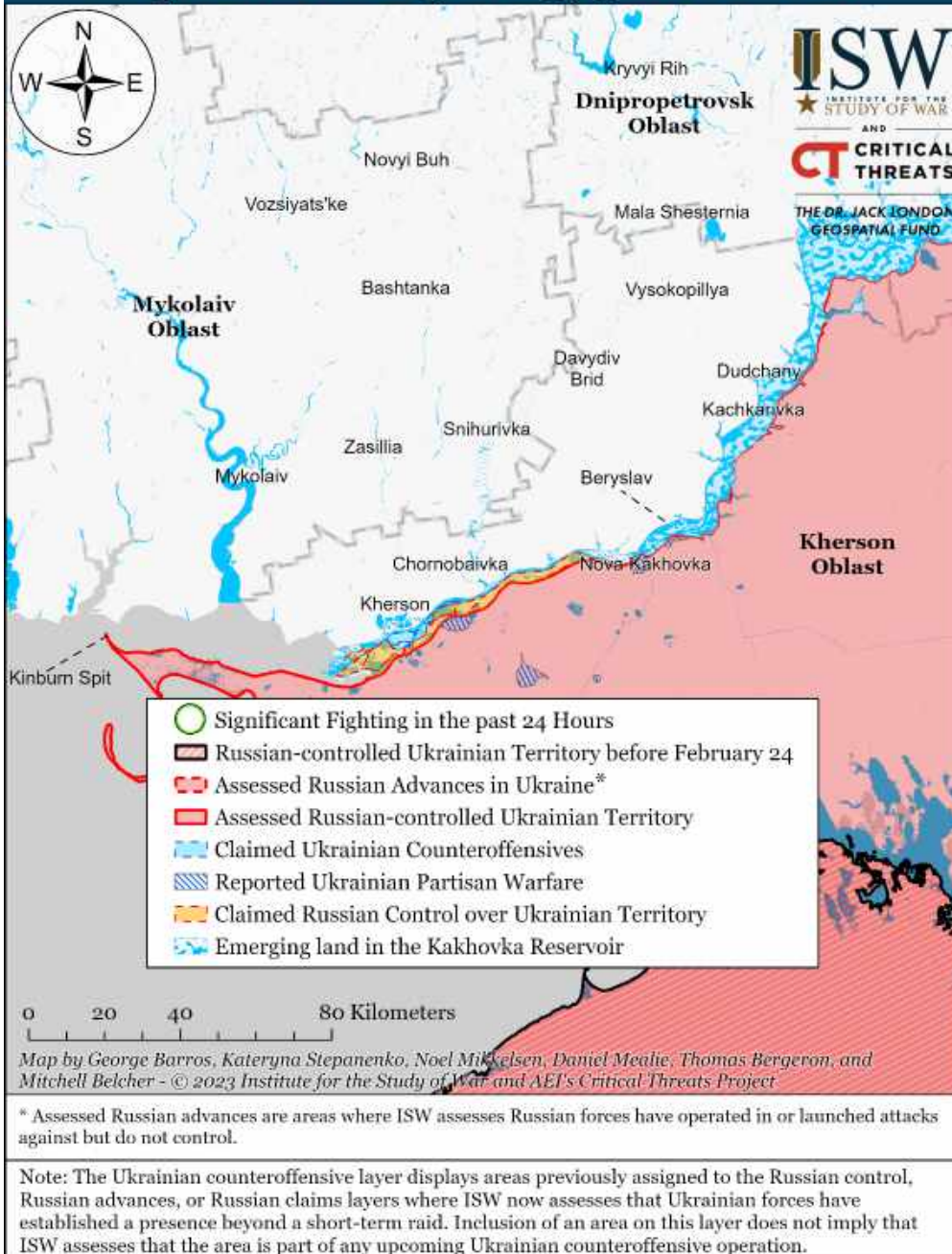
Ukrainian forces may have struck Russian rear military infrastructure in occupied Zaporizhzhia Oblast on September 20. Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov stated that unspecified actors conducted strikes on Russian military infrastructure near Melitopol, Tokmak, and Polohy.[62] Fedorov stated that locals reported smoke coming from a Russian military headquarters and barracks near Melitopol.[63]





Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly continue to operate on the islands in the Dnipro River delta in Kherson Oblast. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces destroyed four Ukrainian Special Forces sabotage and reconnaissance groups near Kozatske (northwest of Nova Kakhovka) and the “Aleshkinsky” and “Pereyaslavsky” islands, likely referring to islands with different names in an unspecified sector of the Dnipro River delta.[64] Other Russian sources claimed that Russian and Ukrainian forces are operating on unspecified islands in the Dnipro River delta in Kherson Oblast.[65]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Ukrainian forces reportedly struck a Russian command post near Verkhnosadove (15km northeast of Sevastopol) in occupied Crimea on September 20. Ukraine's Center for Strategic Communications (UA StratCom) reported that Ukrainian forces successfully struck a Russian Black Sea Fleet command post near Verkhnosadove, but did not specify the weapons used in the strike.[66] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian aircraft launched eight Storm Shadow missiles over Crimea and that Russian air defenses downed five missiles.[67] The milblogger claimed that three

Ukrainian-launched Storm Shadows ‘fell’ near Verkhnosadove.[68] Sevastopol occupation governor Mikhail Razvozhayev claimed that Ukrainian forces also launched an unspecified number of drones during the missile strikes.[69] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Spokesperson Andriy Yusov stated that Ukrainian forces are continuing their planned operations in occupied Crimea and that the Ukrainian General Staff will release additional information later.[70]

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

The Russian Red Cross (RKK) indicated that the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, particularly partial mobilization efforts in autumn 2022, caused a decline in mental health among many Russians. The RKK told Russian newswire *RBK* that it has recorded an increase in the number of Russians with symptoms of depression since February 2022.[71] The RKK reported that over 28,500 people contacted the RKK’s mental health hotline for support since February 2022 and over 500 people have requested “individual psychological support” since October 2022, coinciding with the start of partial mobilization in Russia. The RKK reported that 61 percent of callers were relatives of Russian military personnel and mobilized personnel. The RKK noted that Russians reported feeling an increase in aggressive sentiment and a decrease of anxiety and fear after fall 2022.

The Russian MoD reportedly continues to recruit personnel from penal colonies to support the war effort. Udmurtia-based activist movement “Udmurtiya Protiv Korruptsii” (Udmurtia Against Corruption) reported on September 19 that Russian MoD representatives visited penal colonies in the Republic of Udmurtia to recruit prisoners by promising them pardons after returning from Ukraine to Russia and 100,000 ruble (\$1,036) monthly salaries.[72] “Udmurtiya Protiv Korruptsii” reported that the MoD representatives did not have the penal recruits go through medical or psychological evaluations prior to signing contracts with the MoD.

Russian and occupation authorities are reportedly set to open the Donetsk Higher Combined Arms Command School in occupied Donetsk Oblast by the end of 2023. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that the Donetsk Higher Combined Arms Command school will open by December 1, 2023, and will support over 3,500 employees and cadets.[73] Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a decree on August 17 establishing the new Donetsk command school likely to further integrate the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics (DNR and LNR) proxy formations into the conventional Russian military structure, while simultaneously preventing DNR and LNR servicemen from leaving to Russia amidst full-scale invasion.[74]

### **Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

Russian and occupation authorities continue efforts to deport Ukrainian children to Russia and integrate Ukrainian children into Russian culture. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on September 20 that Russian authorities are offering Russian citizens increased social benefits for taking guardianship of Ukrainian children and that Russian authorities plan to assimilate many Ukrainian children into Russian populations instead of returning the children to Ukrainian relatives.[75] The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported that Russian authorities are bringing

Russian student teachers to teach Ukrainian children in occupied areas to teach Russian language and history.[76]

**Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

Nothing significant to report.

**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.**

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[1] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidoUQtKMPvCAxR9Porrg4SRvnMfJTQ7Hbop4RTdWx6iKcKU82mjMbcAVDEZqZuXoDHdl> ; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/post/s/pfbido2vnGE7Zy1UEpFbDAtWfbwt9Ja2umSip1pNDmxLHw2021XMVYdnxr8RYqohBRbvhEal>

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# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 19, 2023

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Grace Mappes, Riley Bailey, and Mason Clark  
September 19, 2023, 6:50pm 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 2:30pm ET on September 19. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 20 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.**

**The Russian government quickly signaled on September 19 that Russian peacekeeping forces would not intervene in Azerbaijan's military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh, despite Russia's previous security ties to Armenia.** The Azerbaijani Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced that Azerbaijani forces began a military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh on September 19.[1] Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that the Russian military is in contact with Armenian and Azerbaijani officials "at the highest level." [2] Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova issued a general statement calling on "all sides" to stop the bloodshed, claimed that the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh continues to fulfil its assigned tasks, and cited the trilateral Russian-Armenian-Azerbaijani agreements signed in 2020 and 2022 as a path toward peace.[3] Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartapolov stated that the Russian peacekeeping contingent does not have the right to use weapons unless directly threatened.[4] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the Russian peacekeeping contingent lacks any protocols on the use of force or rules of engagement in Nagorno-Karabakh, and instead operates on the basis of the November 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh peace agreement.[5] Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev and *RT* Editor-in-chief and Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan (both notably nationalistic and extreme voices in the Russian government) claimed that Armenia is experiencing the repercussions of its recent efforts to align with the West and distance itself from Russia, though mainline Russian government officials did not promote this framing and maintained equivocal language calling for an end to the fighting.[6] Russian milbloggers expressed support for the safety of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Nagorno-Karabakh while lamenting Russia's waning influence with Armenia and Azerbaijan.[7] The Russian military is unlikely to prioritize peacekeeping operations in Nagorno-Karabakh against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, and minimal Russian peacekeeping operations in Nagorno-Karabakh are unlikely to affect Russian military operations in Ukraine.

**Russian and Ukrainian sources credited superior Ukrainian combat coordination, more precise artillery fire, and stronger electronic warfare (EW) systems for recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut amid continued discussions of significant Russian losses in the area.** Ukrainian personnel that participated in the recent liberation of Klishchiivka (7km southeast of Bakhmut) stated on September 18 that high morale, sufficient training, sufficient resources for artillery fire and drone strikes, good coherence between Ukrainian units, and detailed reconnaissance enabled Ukrainian forces to advance.[8] One Ukrainian commander stated that elements of various Russian units defending in the area suffered from a lack of coherence.[9] Russian Airborne (VDV), Spetsnaz, and 3rd Army Corps elements defended near Klishchiivka; and persistent issues with horizontal integration among Russian forces in Ukraine likely prevented these disparate Russian elements from sharing information and coordinating combat operations.[10] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian artillery units south of Bakhmut are increasingly accurate and precise, enabling Ukrainian forces to safely shell Russian advances closer to Ukrainian positions.[11] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces have advantages in aerial reconnaissance as well as stronger EW systems.[12]

A Russian milblogger with close ties to the VDV acknowledged that elements of the 83rd Guards VDV Brigade, which were defending near Klishchiivka, are now reconstituting in rear areas and that elements of the 31st Guards VDV Brigade continue to defend near the settlement.[13] Russian milbloggers claimed that elements of the Russian 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (3rd Army Corps) are still operating in the Bakhmut area, although Ukrainian forces have likely rendered these elements combat ineffective.[14] Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces completely destroyed the combat capabilities of elements of the 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade, the 31st VDV Brigade, and the 83rd Brigade during the liberation of Andriivka and Klishchiivka.[15] ISW previously assessed that Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast may correspond with the degradation of Russian forces defending in that sector of the front and that recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut may correspond with a similar degradation of Russian forces.[16]

**Russian losses have reportedly significantly increased in western Zaporizhia Oblast in recent days, and the Russian military likely struggles with a lack of available combat-effective units that the Russian command is willing to laterally redeploy to this sector of the front.** Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Russian forces lost 313 personnel (likely a total of killed and wounded) in the Tavriisk direction on September 18, including western Zaporizhia Oblast. Shtupun stated that this is significantly higher than Russian losses during the previous two days when Russian forces lost roughly 200 personnel each day.[17] Shtupun stated that Russian Airborne (VDV) forces are conducting defensive operations in the Tavriisk direction (likely in western Zaporizhia Oblast) and that “Storm-Z” detachments with convict recruits have arrived to act as “cover” for VDV units, possibly referring to the need to cover the VDV units during a potential withdrawal.[18] ISW has previously observed elements of the 7th Guards Mountain VDV Division and 76th Guards VDV Division conducting counterattacks against Ukrainian forces in the Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) area, and ISW has previously assessed that these operations have likely degraded these VDV forces heavily.[19] “Storm-Z” detachments are often combat ineffective and will likely provide the Russian defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast with marginal combat power.

**Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/-136 drone and ballistic missile strikes on Ukrainian rear areas on September 19.** Ukrainian military officials stated that Russian forces launched 31 drones from Krasnodar Krai and 1 Iskander-M ballistic missile from occupied Crimea and that Ukrainian forces shot down 28 drones.[20] The Ukrainian State Service for Emergency Situations reported that Russian drones hit industrial warehouses in Lviv, and the Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Russian Iskander missile hit Kryvyi Rih, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[21] US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin stated on September 19 that Russian strikes on Ukrainian port and grain infrastructure have destroyed at least 280,000 tons of grain in recent months, which he stated would have been enough to feed up to 10.5 million people for a year.[22]

**Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran, Iran on September 19.** Shoigu and Bagheri discussed Russian–Iranian bilateral military cooperation and the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh, Syria, and Afghanistan.[23] Shoigu stated that Russian–Iranian military relations are developing “dynamically and positively.”[24] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) planned Shoigu’s visit to Tehran in advance and that it was not coordinated with Azerbaijan’s escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh.[25] The milblogger also claimed that Shoigu aimed to expand military-technical cooperation with Iran and hypothesized that Russia may be interested in expanding Iranian Shahed drone production on Russian territory.[26]

**The Kremlin continues efforts to strengthen its control of the Russian information space ahead of the September 2024 Russian presidential elections.** The Russian government announced a ban on services that provide virtual mobile numbers, which includes temporary numbers that individuals can use to sign up for anonymous social media accounts without using their personnel credentials, starting on September 1, 2024.[27] This measure likely aims to crack down on anonymous Telegram accounts that criticize the Kremlin and allows the Kremlin to better control the Russian information space. Announcing this measure a year ahead of its implementation is likely a soft rollout designed to gauge a possible information space reaction to the announcement and allow time to soften or strengthen the measure as the implementation and presidential elections approach. The Russian government will reportedly provide a list of alternative services to allow individuals to anonymously sign up for social media accounts, but it is very unlikely that these alternatives will allow individuals to maintain a similar degree of anonymity from the Russian government as existing virtual mobile number services currently afford.[28]

**Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky delivered a speech at the United Nations on September 19.**[29] ISW will cover Zelensky’s trip to the United States after his upcoming visit to Washington, D.C.

#### **Key Takeaways:**

- **The Russian government quickly signaled on September 19 that Russian peacekeeping forces would not intervene in Azerbaijan’s military operation into Nagorno-Karabakh, despite Russia’s previous security ties to Armenia.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian sources credited superior Ukrainian combat coordination, more precise artillery fire, and stronger electronic warfare (EW) systems for recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut amid continued discussions of significant Russian losses in the area.**
- **Russian losses have reportedly significantly increased in western Zaporizhia Oblast in recent days, and the Russian military likely struggles with a lack of available combat effective units that the Russian command is willing to laterally redeploy to this sector of the front.**

- Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/-136 drone and ballistic missile strikes on Ukrainian rear areas on September 19.
- Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Iranian Armed Forces General Staff Chief Major General Mohammad Bagheri in Tehran, Iran on September 19.
- Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not advance on September 19.
- Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front on September 19 and advanced along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line and in western Zaporizhia Oblast.
- A Latvian company has reportedly been exporting chips and microcircuits to Russian defense industrial base (DIB) companies despite international sanctions designed to prevent Russia from importing such components.

## Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



***We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 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

### **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

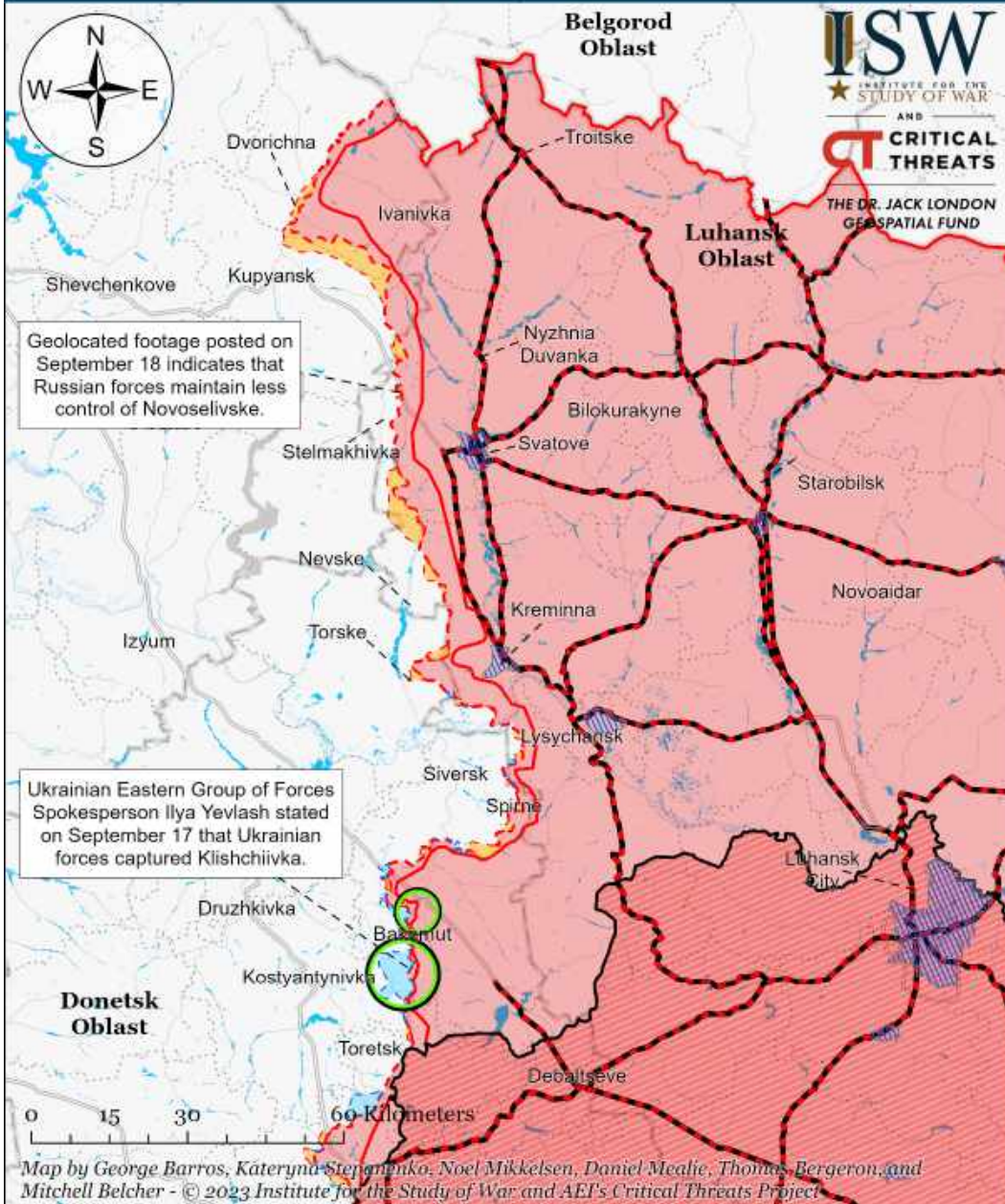
#### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

Russian forces continued offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on September 19 but did not make any confirmed gains. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces continued ground attacks west of Kreminna, in the direction of Torske (17km west of Kreminna), in the Serebryanske forest area (11km south of Kreminna), near Bilohorivka (13km south of Kreminna), and near Spirne (25km south of Kreminna).[30] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces maintain pressure against Ukrainian forces northeast of Kupyansk and on the east bank of the Oskil River west of Svatove, but did not reference specific combat engagements.[31] The Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that a Russian airstrike destroyed the bridge across the Oskil River in Kupyansk, likely in an effort to hinder Ukrainian supply efforts across the river.[32] Ukrainian forces maintain control of a number of other bridges across the Oskil, however. Geolocated footage posted on September 17 and 19 shows an element of the Russian 15th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Combined Arms Army, Central Military District) operating near Raihorodka (12km southwest of Svatove) and Nadiya (15km west of Svatove).[33]

Ukrainian forces continued limited offensive operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on September 19. Geolocated footage published on September 18 shows Ukrainian forces retreating from southwestern Novoselivske (15km north of Svatove), indicating that Ukrainian forces may retain the ability to reach the outskirts of the settlement.[34] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces periodically attack near Kreminna and Torske (14km west of Kreminna) and in the Serebryanske forest area.[35]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of September 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

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

Note: Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces captured two square kilometers over the past week and 51 square kilometers near Bakhmut since the beginning of the counteroffensive.

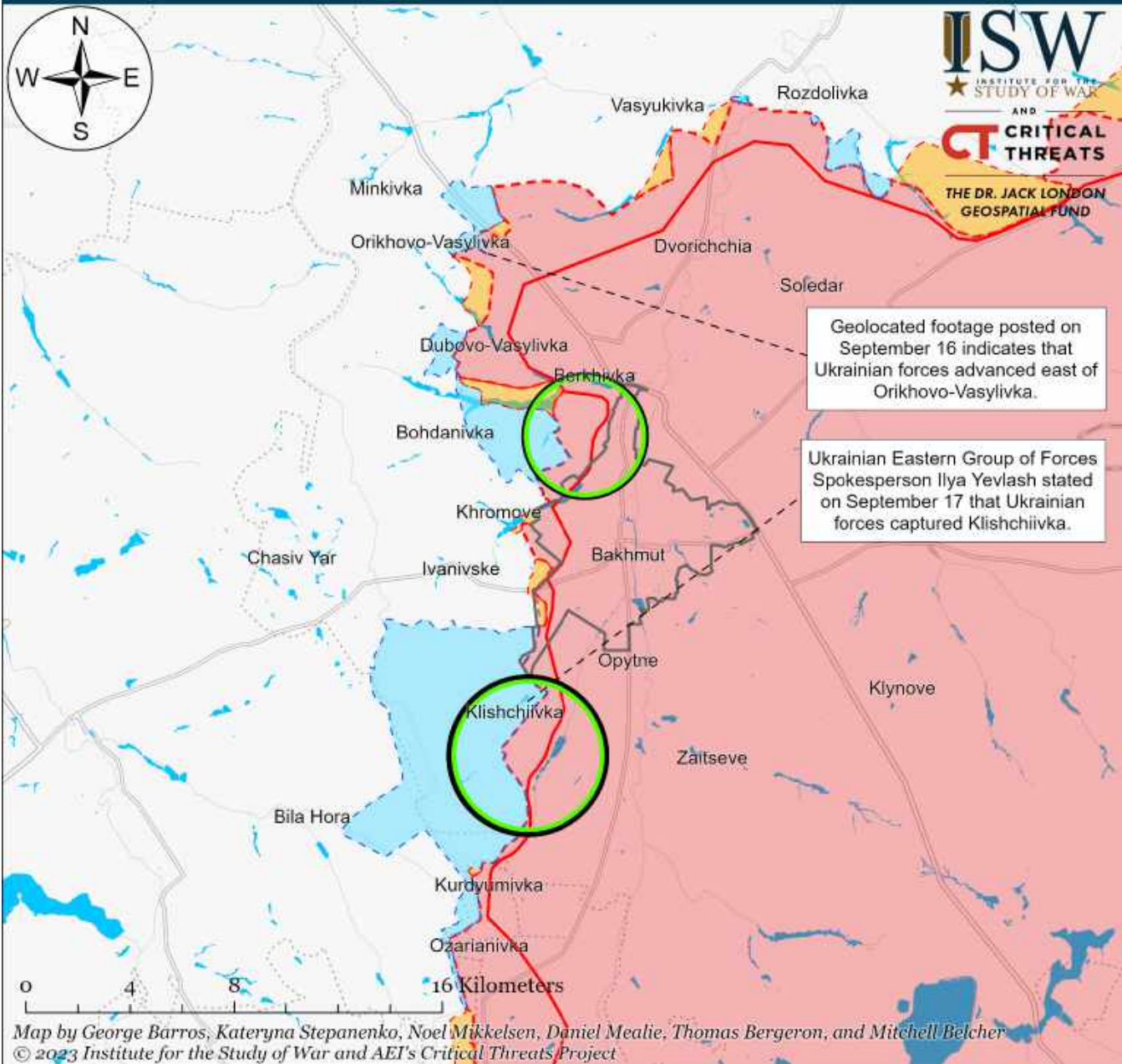
**Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)**

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut area on September 19 but did not make any confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continue assaults south of Bakhmut and are inflicting significant manpower and equipment losses on Russian forces.[36] Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting continued near Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut), and Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut).[37] Russian milbloggers claimed that most of Andriivka and Klishchiivka are contested “gray zones.”[38] A Russian milblogger claimed that the fiercest battles in the area are occurring near the railway line east of Klishchiivka.[39]

Russian forces counterattacked near Bakhmut on September 19 but did not make any confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults west of Yahidne (2km north of Bakhmut) and near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.[40] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces counterattacked near Kurdyumivka and in Klishchiivka, where they reportedly established a foothold.[41] ISW has not seen visual confirmation of Russian forces maintaining positions in Klishchiivka, however.



# Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of September 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Bakhmut City Limits
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

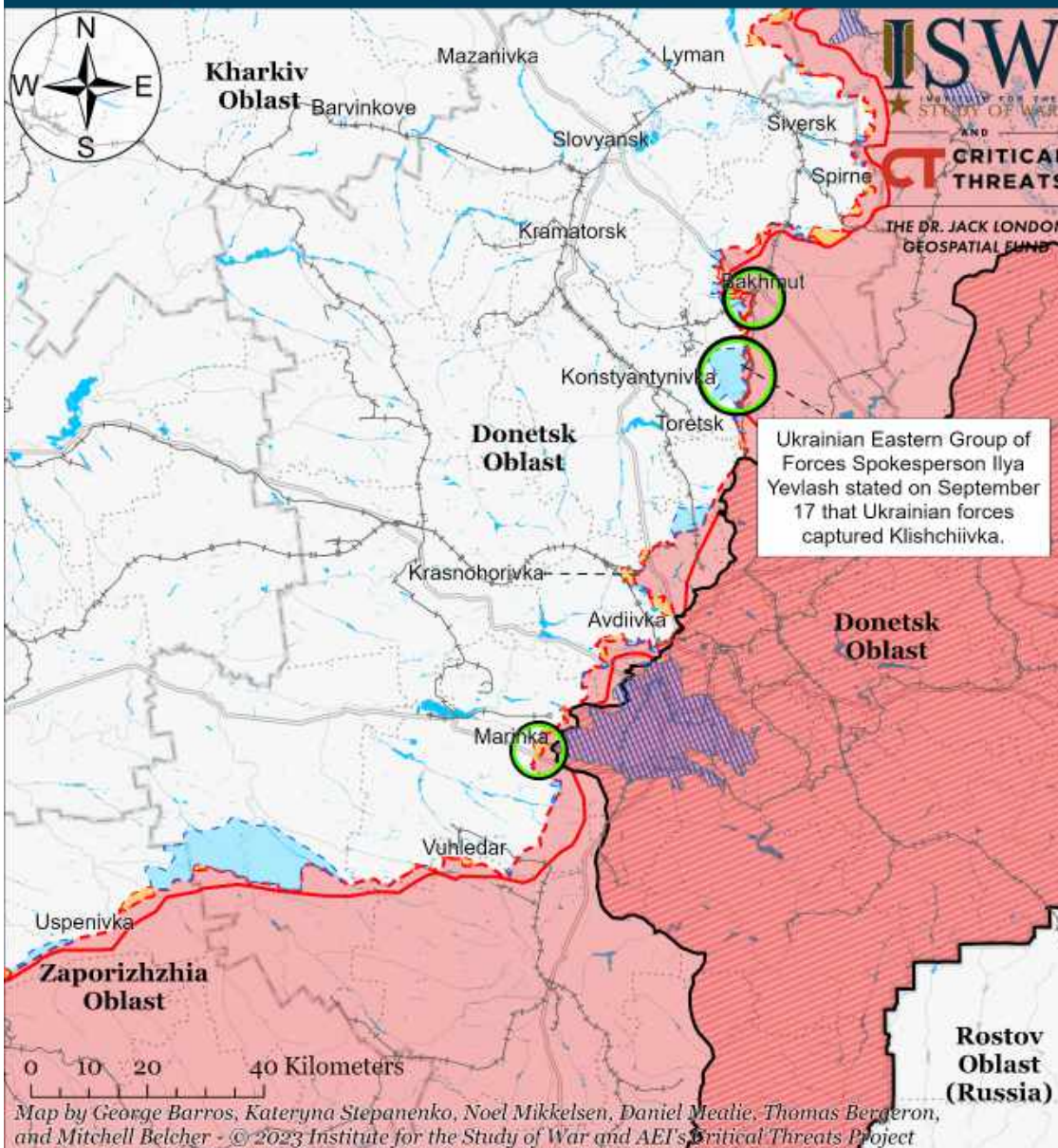
Note: Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces captured two square kilometers over the past week and 51 square kilometers near Bakhmut since the beginning of the counteroffensive.

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited unsuccessful ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front on September 19. The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that elements of the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces repelled a Ukrainian assault near Kamianka (5km northwest of Avdiivka).[42] A Russian milblogger claimed that recent Ukrainian offensive actions near Opytne (4km south of Avdiivka) and Krasnohorivka (22km southwest of Avdiivka) have not resulted in significant changes to the frontline.[43]

Russian forces continued limited offensive operations along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City front on September 19 but did not make any confirmed gains. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled 10 Russian assaults near Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka).[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that recent Russian offensive activity near Keramik (10km north of Avdiivka) and the Trudovska mine shaft (near Krasnohorivka) have not resulted in significant changes to the frontline.[45]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of September 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Major Railroads
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

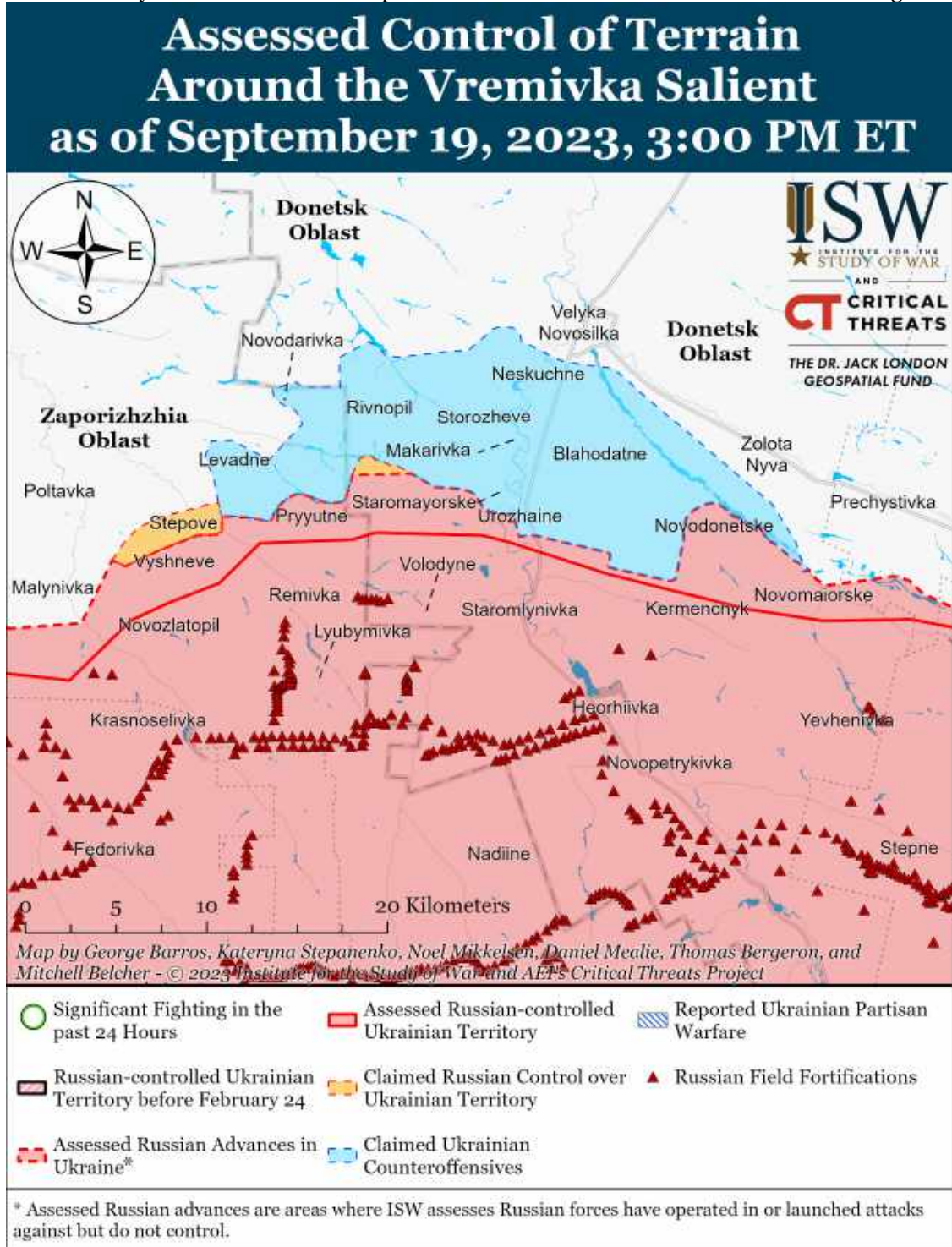
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces captured two square kilometers over the past week and 51 square kilometers near Bakhmut since the beginning of the counteroffensive.



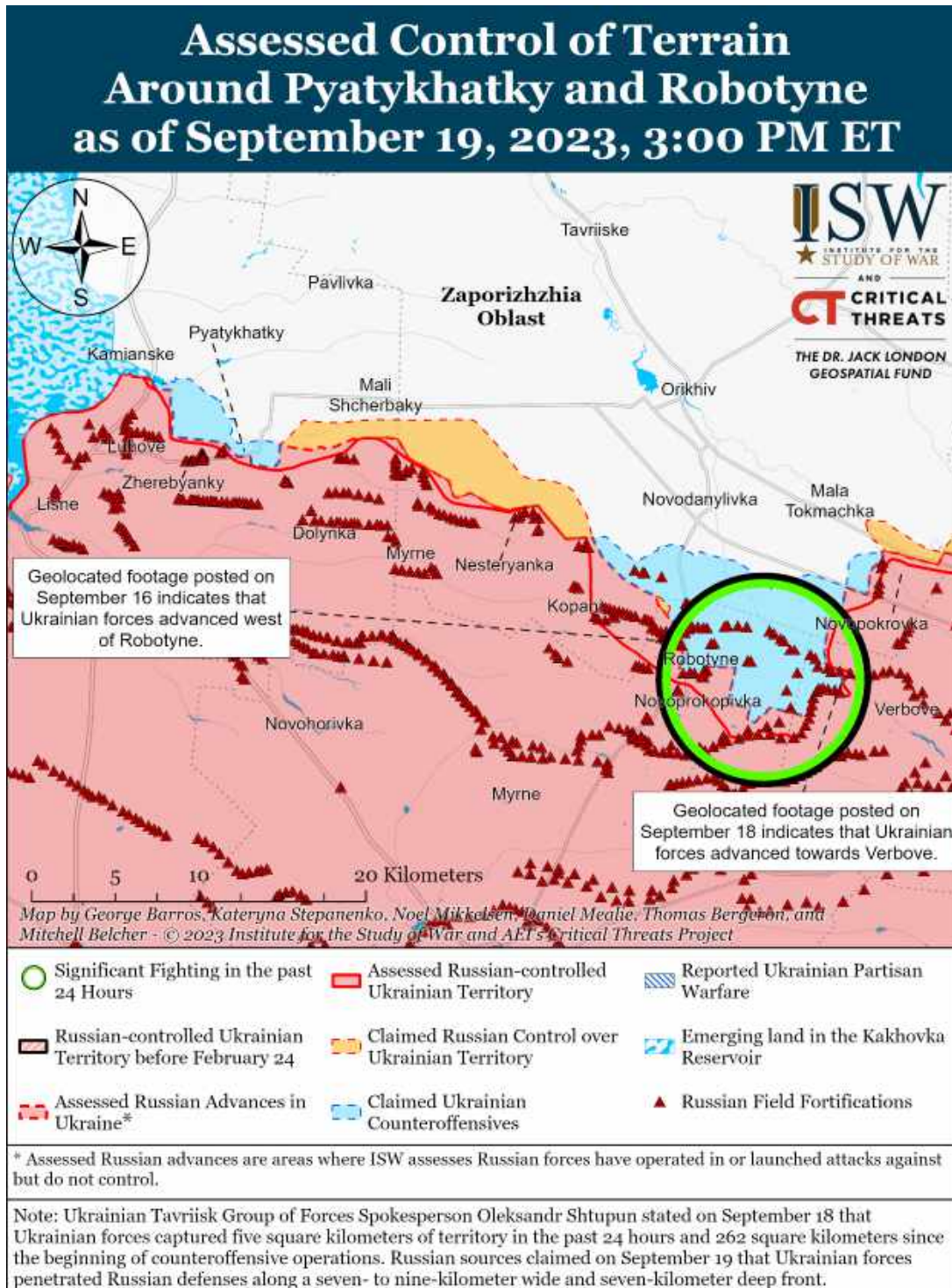
**Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)**

Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area but did not advance on September 19. Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka), Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka), Novodonetske (12km southeast of Velyka Novosilka), and Novomayorske (18km southeast of Velyka Novosilka).[46] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces retreated from the northwestern outskirts of Novomayorske and that fighting has decreased along the Novomayorske-Novodonetske line.[47] A Russian milblogger claimed on September 19 that elements of the Russian 40th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet) repelled Ukrainian attacks near Novomayorske in the western Zaporizhzhia–eastern Donetsk Oblast border area throughout the past several weeks.[48]



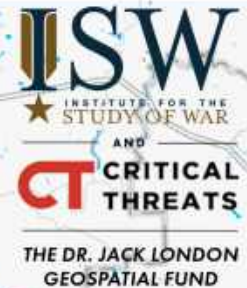
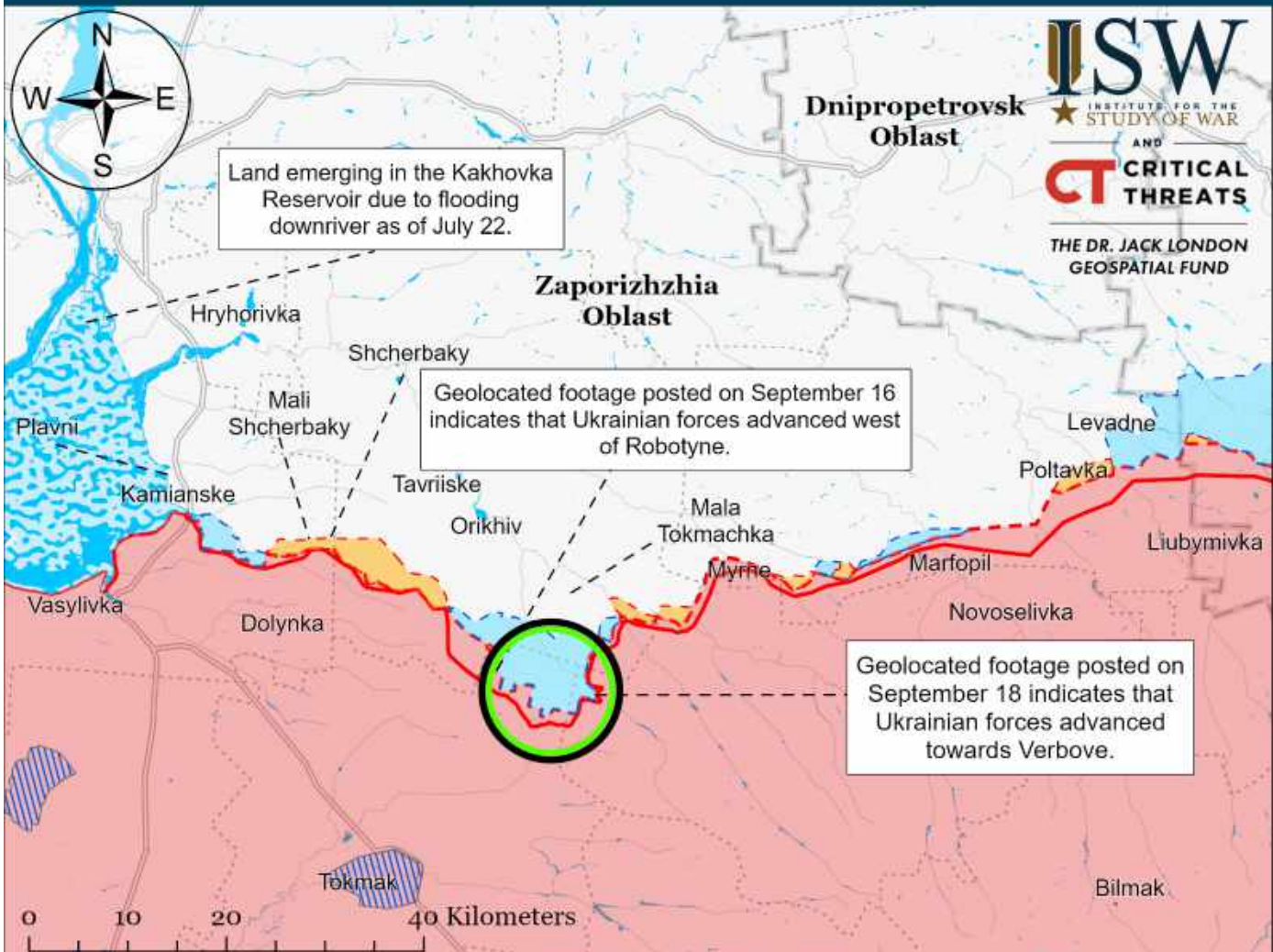
Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on September 19 and advanced. Geolocated footage published on September 18 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[49] Russian sources, including the Russian MoD, claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked in the direction of Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv) and near Verbove, and Robotyne.[50] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian 429th Motorized Rifle Regiment (19th Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) repelled a Ukrainian attack near Zherybyanky (26km southwest of Orikhiv).[51] A Russian milblogger claimed on September 19 that Ukrainian forces have advanced along a front seven to nine kilometers wide to a depth of seven kilometers in the area of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv) since the start of the counteroffensive.[52]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast but did not advance on September 19. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Robotyne.[53]





# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of September 19, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

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

Note: Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Oleksandr Shtupun stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces captured five square kilometers of territory in the past 24 hours and 262 square kilometers since the beginning of counteroffensive operations. Russian sources claimed on September 19 that Ukrainian forces penetrated Russian defenses along a seven- to nine-kilometer wide and seven-kilometer deep front.

A Russian milblogger claimed that several small Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups landed on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro River. The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces landed north of Pidstepne (about 12km east of the Antonivsky Bridge) and on Kozatskyi Island (northwest of Nova Kakhovaka) and that Ukrainian forces control the northern part of Kozatskyi Island.[54]

Select Ukrainian and Russian sources stated on September 19 that Ukrainian forces struck two Russian military headquarters in Zaporizhia and Kherson oblasts. The Department of Strategic Communications of the Ukrainian Armed Forces stated that Ukrainian forces struck an unspecified Russian military headquarters near Melitopol in western Zaporizhia Oblast.[55] A Russian insider source claimed that Ukrainian forces struck the headquarters of the Russian 7th Guards Mountain Airborne (VDV) Division in Kherson Oblast.[56] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim, and other Russian sources have not made similar claims.

The United Kingdom MoD stated that the Russian 40th Army Corps has taken over responsibility for the Kherson Oblast sector of the front.[57] ISW has previously reported on the formation of the new Russian 40th Army Corps as part of the Southern Military District (SMD), and the role of the 40th Army Corps in Kherson Oblast is currently unclear.[58]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 19, 2023, 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: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

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

A Latvian company has reportedly been exporting chips and microcircuits to Russian defense industrial base (DIB) companies despite international sanctions designed to prevent Russia from importing such components. Russian opposition outlet the *Insider* reported on September 19 that the Latvian company Lesta-M has been a key importer of microelectronics to Russia since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[59] Lesta-M has reportedly supplied microelectronics to Russian DIB companies, including the Research Institute of Electronic Devices (NIIEP) that develops Russian Iskander missiles and the US-sanctioned “Kupol” Izhevsk Electromechanical Plant that develops Tor-M2E anti-aircraft missile systems.[60] *The Insider* reported that Lesta-M microelectronics have not yet appeared in downed Russian missiles, however.[61]

A Russian official stated that Russia will launch a digital registry in 2025 of those eligible for military service. Deputy Minister of Digital Development Oleg Kachanov stated on September 19 that Russia will launch the digital register in 2025, which will notify conscripts via electronic summonses.[62] Kachanov noted that Russian authorities will test the digital register in one or two unspecified Russian federal subjects by the end of 2023, however.[63] Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a law on April 14 on the creation of a digital register that will allow Russian military registration and enlistment offices to send electronic summonses to citizens eligible for conscription.[64]

A Russian milblogger indicated that the Russian military command continues to view Russian penal recruits as expendable manpower to attack with on certain areas of the frontline. The milblogger claimed that only 7 of 48 personnel of a “Storm-Z” unit survived an attack on an unspecified settlement on September 18 and that Chechen forces participating in the assault also sustained similar casualty rates.[65] The milblogger complained that the Russian command “abandoned” the attacking units in broad daylight without reconnaissance or artillery support, leaving the Russian infantry vulnerable to Ukrainian air, artillery, and tank fire. The milblogger complained that Russian artillery only began covering a small infantry group when the group captured a small foothold on the outskirts of the unspecified settlement. Russian “Storm-Z” units are hastily formed units primarily comprised of penal colony recruits, which the Russian military command has increasingly used to conduct assault operations on the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line despite high casualty rates.[66]

## **Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

The Russian military reportedly continues to forcibly mobilize Ukrainian civilians in occupied areas. Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Artem Lysohor reported on September 19 that the Russian military is forcibly mobilizing people in unspecified occupied areas and noted that military registration and enlistment officers have been updating data on residents of occupied Polovynkyne, Starobil'skyi Raion, Luhansk Oblast.[67] The Kherson Oblast occupation Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) reported on September 18 that it is adding all civilians in occupied Kherson Oblast with Russian passports to the Russian military register.[68] The Kherson Oblast occupation MVD claimed that Russian occupation officials are adding civilians with Russian passports to the military register in accordance with Russian law and do not intend to conscript or mobilize civilians, however.[69]

## **Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* published satellite imagery on September 18 showing a decrease in the number of tents at the Wagner Group camp in Tsel, Belarus and reported that all the tents were dismantled.[70] The Ukrainian National Resistance Center reported on September 17 that fewer than 1,000 Wagner personnel remain in Belarus and that 200 other Wagner personnel remain to train Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) forces.[71]

Belarus continues efforts likely aimed at supporting the Kremlin’s sanctions evasion schemes. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with Krasnodar Krai Head Veniamin Kondratyev on September 19 to negotiate on industrial trade and boasted about Russia’s willingness to invest in Belarusian microelectronics production capabilities.[72] The Belarusian MoD reported that it received a Vietnamese MoD delegation to discuss bilateral logistical support cooperation, which Belarus would likely use to support Russian logistics.[73]

## **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.**

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[35] [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/25750](https://t.me/dva_majors/25750); <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/50625>

[36] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidojSVTWtTVVTrQmQoPi645iGnf8NHbXj6Zwiu2mB4boBZxn3J2yo3KkC2WmnoNQ1WML>

[37] <https://t.me/rybar/52052> ; [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/25750](https://t.me/dva_majors/25750) ; [https://t.me/rusich\\_army/10915](https://t.me/rusich_army/10915) ; <https://t.me/sashakots/42257> ; <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/50625>

[38] <https://t.me/sashakots/42257> ; <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/50625> ; [https://t.me/rusich\\_army/10915](https://t.me/rusich_army/10915) ;  
<https://t.me/rybar/52052>

[39] <https://t.me/sashakots/42257> ;

[40] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidojSVTWtTVVTrQmQoPi645iGnf8NHbXj6Zwiu2mB4boBZxn3J2yo3KkC2WmnoNQ1WML> ;  
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbido4f6DtYBVrziZNeFnVYZREcFMayub6AsUEQiypEpW6BVGg9K1aJ1jMEgQXzNCFVU5l>

[41] <https://t.me/dolgarevaanna/4488> ; <https://t.me/wargonzo/15124> ; <https://t.me/sashakots/42257>



- [42] [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30612](https://t.me/mod_russia/30612) ; [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30615](https://t.me/mod_russia/30615)
- [43] <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/50625>
- [44] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidojSVTWtTVVTrQmQoPi645iGnf8NHbXj6Zwiu2mB4boBZxn3J2yo3KkC2WmnoNQ1WML>
- [45] <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/50625>
- [46] [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30612](https://t.me/mod_russia/30612) ; [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30618](https://t.me/mod_russia/30618) ; <https://t.me/wargonzo/15124> ; <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/50625>
- [47] <https://t.me/rybar/52062> ; [https://t.me/voin\\_dv/5012](https://t.me/voin_dv/5012) ; [https://t.me/voin\\_dv/5014](https://t.me/voin_dv/5014)
- [48] <https://t.me/rybar/52062>
- [49] <https://twitter.com/moklasen/status/1703850380013043740>; <https://t.me/aZimutVoina/1237>; <https://x.com/LudvikMilos/status/1704022340776902997?s=20>; <https://twitter.com/moklasen/status/1703850381820768516>
- [50] [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30612](https://t.me/mod_russia/30612) ; [https://t.me/mod\\_russia/30616](https://t.me/mod_russia/30616) ; <https://t.me/wargonzo/15124> ; [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/25747](https://t.me/dva_majors/25747) ; [https://t.me/dva\\_majors/25808](https://t.me/dva_majors/25808) ; [https://t.me/rusich\\_army/10911](https://t.me/rusich_army/10911) ; [https://t.me/Dead\\_heads/283](https://t.me/Dead_heads/283) ; [https://t.me/boris\\_rozhin/97976](https://t.me/boris_rozhin/97976) ; [https://t.me/grey\\_zone/20650](https://t.me/grey_zone/20650)
- [51] <https://t.me/batalyon15/2947>
- [52] [https://t.me/Dead\\_heads/283](https://t.me/Dead_heads/283) ; [https://t.me/boris\\_rozhin/97976](https://t.me/boris_rozhin/97976) ; [https://t.me/grey\\_zone/20650](https://t.me/grey_zone/20650)
- [53] <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbidojSVTWtTVVTrQmQoPi645iGnf8NHbXj6Zwiu2mB4boBZxn3J2yo3KkC2WmnoNQ1WML> ; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid04f6DtYBVrz1ZNeFnVYZREcFMayub6AsUEQiyEpW6BVGg9K1aJ1jMEgQXzNcFvU5l>
- [54] <https://t.me/rybar/52080>
- [55] <https://t.me/AFUStratCom/20076>
- [56] <https://t.me/vchkogpu/41906>
- [57] <https://x.com/DefenceHQ/status/1704007051792310745?s=20>
- [58] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-3-2023> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-15-2023> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-22-2023>
- [59] <https://t.me/theinsider/21972> ; <https://theins dot ru/politika/264866>
- [60] <https://t.me/theinsider/21972> ; <https://theins dot ru/politika/264866>
- [61] <https://t.me/theinsider/21972> ; <https://theins dot ru/politika/264866>
- [62] <https://www.kommersant dot ru/doc/6224010> ; <https://t.me/svobodnieslova/2966>
- [63] <https://www.kommersant dot ru/doc/6224010> ; <https://t.me/svobodnieslova/2966>
- [64] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-19-2023>
- [65] [https://t.me/philologist\\_zov/523](https://t.me/philologist_zov/523)
- [66] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-20-2023> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Aug%2011%20Russian%20Offensive%20Campaign%20As>

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; <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/July%2010%20Russian%20Offensive%20Campaign%20Assessment%20PDF.pdf>;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Aug%2014%20Russian%20Offensive%20Campaign%20Assessment%20PDF.pdf>

[67] <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/13738>

[68] [https://t.me/police\\_kherson\\_press/6339](https://t.me/police_kherson_press/6339)

[69] [https://t.me/police\\_kherson\\_press/6339](https://t.me/police_kherson_press/6339)

[70] <https://t.me/severrealii/20060>; <https://www.svoboda.org/a/32598143.html>

[71] <https://t.me/radiosvoboda/47775>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-18-2023>

[72] [https://t.me/pul\\_1/9996](https://t.me/pul_1/9996) ; <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-belarus-segodnja-vostrebovana-v-rossii-kak-nikogda-588916-2023/> ; [https://t.me/pul\\_1/10002](https://t.me/pul_1/10002)

[73] <https://t.me/modmilby/32191>

# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, September 18, 2023

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September 18, 2023, 9:00pm 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 2:00pm ET on September 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the September 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

**Ukraine’s liberation of Klishchiivka and Andriivka south of Bakhmut may have degraded the Russian defense in the area south of Bakhmut and could have rendered combat ineffective in as many as three Russian brigades according to Ukrainian military officials.** Ukrainian Ground Forces Commander Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi stated on September 18 that Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut) were important elements of the Russian Bakhmut-Horlivka defensive line that Ukrainian forces “breached.”[1] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated on September 17 that Ukraine’s liberation of Klishchiivka will allow Ukrainian forces to control Russian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) supplying the Russian force grouping in the Bakhmut area — likely referring to Ukrainian forces’ ability to establish fire control over the T0513 Bakhmut-Horlivka highway.[2] ISW is currently unable independently to evaluate the strength and extent of the Russian defensive fortifications in the Bakhmut area, although Russian forces have likely fortified their defense lines near Bakhmut less heavily than they did in southern Ukraine. Russian forces south of Bakhmut are also likely battle-weary from the recent efforts to hold Klishchiivka and Andriivka, and the Ukrainian capture of two settlements defending a key Russian GLOC supporting Bakhmut indicates that these forces will likely struggle to replenish their combat strength and defend against any further Ukrainian offensive activity south of Bakhmut. There are no immediate indications that the liberation of Klishchiivka and Andriivka will portend a higher rate of Ukrainian advance south of Bakhmut, however, and the Russian defense of positions west of the T0513 will likely continue to present challenges for Ukrainian forces in the area.

**The Ukrainian liberation of two villages that Russian forces were fighting hard to hold could correspond with the severe degradation of the Russian units defending them, as Ukrainian advances in western Zaporizhia Oblast appear to correspond with the significant degradation of defending Russian units and formations in that sector of the front.** Russian forces defending in western Zaporizhia Oblast since the start of the counteroffensive have done so largely without operational-level unit rotations and have likely suffered compounding losses.[3] Elements of the Russian 42nd Motorized Rifle Division’s 71st, 70th, and 291st Motorized Rifle Regiments (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) routinely repelled Ukrainian

assaults and engaged in various “combat clashes,” including limited engagements and some counterattacks, during the first phase of the counteroffensive from June to August 2023.[4] In mid-to-late August, Ukrainian forces began breaking through the initial Russian defensive layer that these elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division had spent considerable amounts of manpower, personnel, and effort to hold.[5] Russian reporting and footage suggest that many of these elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division have since withdrawn to positions behind a subsequent Russian defensive layer between Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv) and Solodka Balka (20km south of Orikhiv) and now mainly shell advancing Ukrainian units.[6] The absence of recent reports and footage of these elements participating in combat engagements in western Zaporizhia Oblast suggests that casualties sustained during the first phases of the Ukrainian counteroffensive rendered them combat ineffective. Elements of the 70th Motorized Rifle Regiment reportedly temporarily withdrew to a rear area during the Ukrainian breakthrough and returned to frontline positions in early September, suggesting that Ukrainian advances had degraded this unit enough to compel the Russian command to give it time to refit in the rear — which would be one of the very few unit rotations ISW has observed on this sector of the front.[7] Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet), which also held forward positions at the initial Russian defensive layer during the earlier phases of the counteroffensive, similarly appear to be deployed further behind the Russian defensive layer ahead of the current Ukraine advance.[8] Elements of the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade reportedly engaged in close combat during the Ukrainian push through Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv), and Russian milbloggers maintain that some elements of the unit hold positions near the southern outskirts of Robotyne.[9]

**Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have resulted in the particularly severe degradation of critical elements of the Russian elastic defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast.** Elements of the Russian 22nd and 45th Separate Spetsnaz Brigades appeared to be responsible for counterattacking against significant Ukrainian advances in the Robotyne area during the earlier phases of the counteroffensive and likely suffered heavy losses in these operations.[10] Russian reporting and footage of the Robotyne area in recent weeks has largely omitted mention of these Spetsnaz brigades, suggesting that this degradation may have severely impacted their ability to continue counterattacking. A prominent milblogger claimed that elements of the 45th Spetsnaz Brigade were still operating near the frontline as of September 12, however.[11] Elements of the Russian 7th Guards Mountain Airborne (VDV) Division that laterally deployed to the Robotyne area in mid-August during the Ukrainian breakthrough now appear to be responsible for conducting counterattacks against the most forward advances of the Ukrainian breach.[12] Russian sources routinely claim that VDV elements, which may include elements of the 76th Guards VDV Division that also laterally redeployed to the area, repel Ukrainian assaults and conduct counterattacks near Robotyne[13] The degradation of the elements of the 22nd and 45th Separate Spetsnaz Brigades initially responsible for counterattacking in the Robotyne area likely prompted the Russian command to laterally redeploy these elements of the 7th and 76th VDV Divisions to assume responsibility for counterattacking. The Russian elastic defense requires one echelon of Russian forces to slow a Ukrainian tactical advance while a second echelon of forces rolls back that advance through counterattacking. Counterattacking requires significant morale and relatively high combat capabilities, and the Russian military appears to rely on relatively elite VDV units and formations for this undertaking, possibly at the expense of heavily degrading these forces.[14]



ISW has not directly observed the level of degradation among the Russian units referenced above and it is possible that some have suffered heavier losses than others. It is also possible that the Russians have used the arrival of elements of the 76th and 7th VDV Divisions to conduct belated unit rotations of their tired frontline units. The current battlefield geometry between the Ukrainian advance and current Russian defensive positions may also be contributing to the apparent absence of these likely degraded units from combat engagements, as the gap between Ukrainian advances and Russian defensive positions may result in less direct combat engagements. Ukrainian forces may engage these units in more direct combat as they further advance into and past the current Russian defensive layer. It is thus too soon to assess with high confidence that the initial defenders in this sector have been rendered combat ineffective, but the evidence currently available points in that direction.

**Recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut may correspond with the similar degradation of defending Russian units in the area.** Syrskyi stated that Ukrainian forces completely destroyed the combat capabilities of elements of the 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (3rd Army Corps), the 31st Guards VDV Brigade, and the 83rd Guards VDV Brigade during the liberation of Andriivka and Klishchiivka.[15] Russian “Vostok” Battalion commander Alexander Khodakovsky’s claim that the 31st VDV Brigade commander has been killed supports this statement.[16] The 72nd Motorized Brigade has likely been rendered combat ineffective, although the exact level of losses among the two VDV brigades remains unclear.[17] These VDV elements were involved in counterattacking and attempting to roll back Ukrainian advances around Bakhmut — similar to the way that VDV elements operate in western Zaporizhia Oblast — and likely suffered heavy losses.[18] If recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut resulted in the destruction of the 31st and 83rd VDV brigades’ combat capabilities, then the Russian command will likely laterally redeploy elements of another relatively elite formation to maintain critical elements of the Russian defense south of Bakhmut. Ukrainian counteroffensive operations have pinned elements of two VDV divisions and another VDV brigade in addition to the 83rd and 31st in the Bakhmut direction, and the Russian command may decide to conduct tactical redeployments to make up for the reported losses among the 83rd and 31st VDV brigades.[19] Lateral redeployments from elsewhere in Ukraine or substantial tactical redeployments of other VDV elements in the Bakhmut area would therefore indicate that recent Ukrainian advances have resulted in significant Russian losses.

**Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone and cruise missile strikes on coastal and rear areas of Ukraine on the night of September 17-18.** Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched 24 Shahed drones from Krasnodar Krai and occupied Crimea and 17 Kh-101/555/55 air-launched cruise missiles from Tu-95MS strategic bombers that took off from Volgograd Oblast.[20] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 18 drones and all 17 missiles.[21] The Ukrainian Air Force noted that the Russian drone strike targeted Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts.[22] Russian sources claimed that Russian drones hit ports in Odesa Oblast and that the Russian missiles targeted the Starokostyantyniv airfield in Khmelnytskyi Oblast.[23]

**An organization with alleged ties to Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriienko is reportedly responsible for disseminating pro-war propaganda and false information about Ukraine to prominent figures in the Russian information space.** Russian opposition news outlets *Meduza*, *Vazhnye Istorii*, and the *Bell* reported on September 13 that the non-profit organization “Dialog” created multiple popular Telegram channels to increase pro-Russian reporting on the war in Ukraine at the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion and has subsequently been distributing false information about the war in Ukraine to prominent figures in

the Russian information space, including Kremlin propagandist Vladimir Solovyov, prominent milbloggers, and popular news aggregators.[24] Dialog is also reportedly affiliated with pro-Russian Telegram channels that mimic Ukrainian channels.[25] Dialog reportedly advised unspecified individuals in the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) to issue a “tough” and “prompt” response following increasing reports of a lack of ammunition and provisions among Russian mobilized personnel in Ukraine.[26] Dialog-affiliated sources also reportedly disseminated negative reports about deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin while Wagner forces were fighting in Ukraine.[27] The Russian Ministry of Digital Development reportedly transferred 6.5 billion rubles (about \$67.7 million) to Dialog in 2022, and its deputy general director, Vladimir Tabak, reportedly has ties to Kiriienko.[28] ISW has consistently observed some Russian sources making similar claims with similar language on the same days, which may suggest that some Russian sources receive information from the same source. Kiriienko’s reported affiliation with Dialog is consistent with ISW’s assessment that some Russian *siloviki* and senior military commanders control various Telegram channels intended to further their individual objectives in the Russian information space.[29]

**Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Moscow on September 18.** Lavrov stated in his opening remarks that the world is undergoing “tectonic shifts” and reiterated boilerplate rhetoric on the importance and previous successes of Russian-Chinese cooperation.[30]

**Imprisoned ardent nationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin issued a direct criticism of Russian President Vladimir Putin to rally supporters to his cause.** Girkin, via his lawyer Alexander Molokhov, posted a statement on September 18 dated September 15 that justifies Girkin’s opposition to Putin.[31] Girkin humorously answered the question “why Strelkov [Girkin] has gone crazy” for asserting that he is “better than Putin.” Girkin claimed that the “Troubles” (likely referencing the Time of Troubles in 17th century Russia that preceded the rise of the Romanov dynasty) have begun in Russia and that the Kremlin’s attempts to address the direst issues have failed, so the current “bureaucratic-oligarchic system” will eventually “collapse.” Girkin claimed that it is his “duty” to try to unite other patriots to be a suitable alternative but acknowledged that he may lack the resources to succeed or may have begun his initiative too early. Girkin expressed hope that his efforts will inspire others to “act as leaders of the national-patriotic movement” because “it is too late to be afraid and wait” as it is the “eve of the collapse of Russian statehood.”

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Ukraine’s liberation of Klishchiivka and Andriivka south of Bakhmut may have degraded the Russian defense in the area south of Bakhmut and could have rendered combat ineffective as many as three Russian brigades according to Ukrainian military officials.**
- **Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have resulted in the particularly severe degradation of critical elements of the Russian elastic defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **Ukrainian counteroffensive operations may have resulted in the particularly severe degradation of critical elements of the Russian elastic defense in western Zaporizhia Oblast.**

- **Recent Ukrainian advances south of Bakhmut may correspond with the similar degradation of defending Russian units in the area.**
- **Russian forces conducted a series of Shahed-131/136 drone and cruise missile strikes on coastal and rear areas of Ukraine on the night of September 17-18.**
- **An organization with alleged ties to Russian First Deputy Presidential Chief of Staff Sergey Kiriyenko is reportedly responsible for disseminating pro-war propaganda and false information about Ukraine to prominent figures in the Russian information space.**
- **Russian forces conducted offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia and advanced in some areas on September 18.**
- **Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in at least two sectors of the front and advanced in western Zaporizhia on September 18.**
- **Some Russian sources claimed that former Wagner Group personnel are working closely with Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) in order to return fighting in Ukraine.**

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of September 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



***We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 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

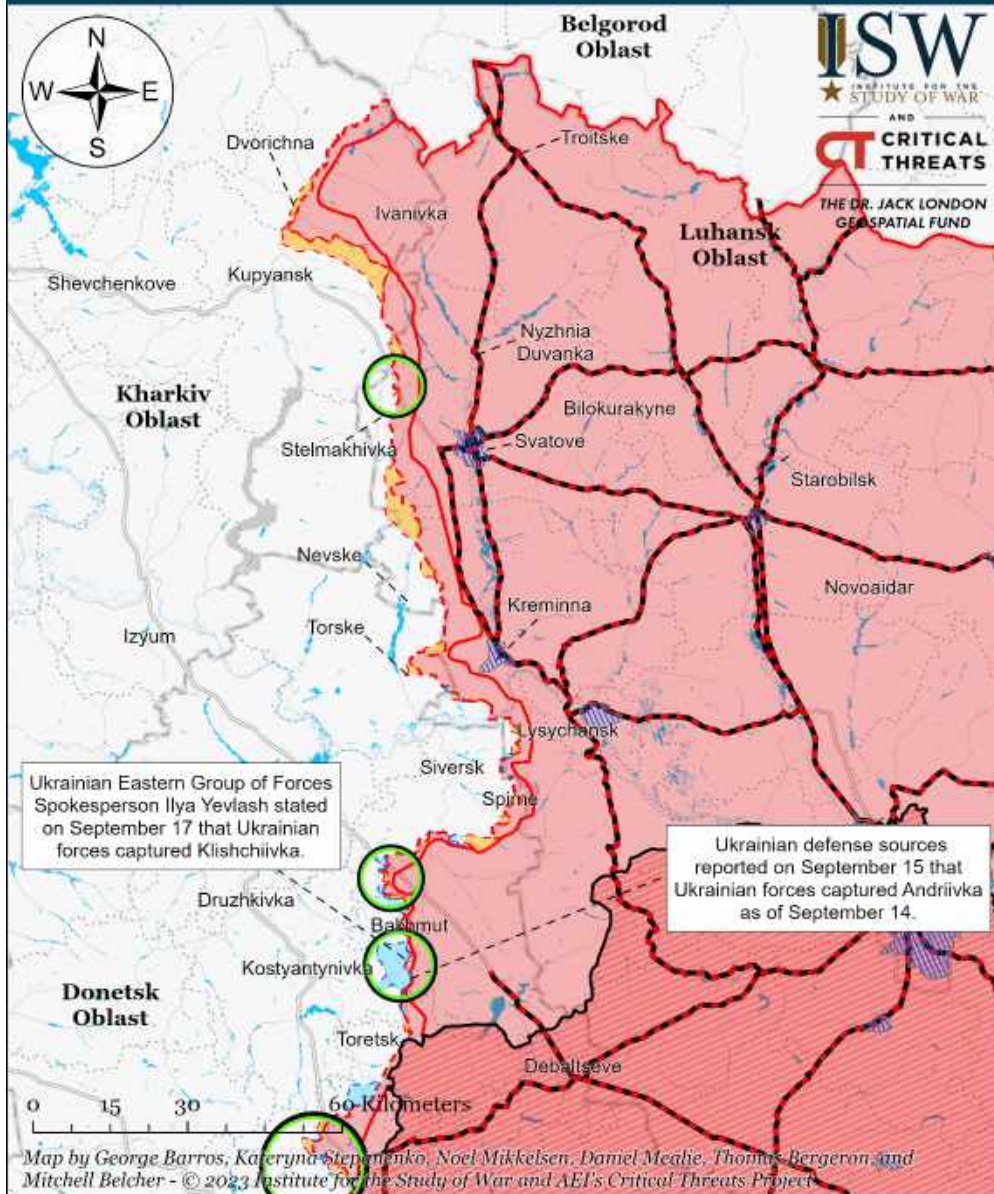
## **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

Russian forces continued limited ground attacks along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on September 18 but did not make any confirmed gains. Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Novoselivske (15km northwest of Svatove).[32] Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that Russian forces have slowed their offensive activity in the Kupyansk direction.[33] Malyar stated that Russian forces conducted no assault operations near Kreminna and continued to regroup in the area.[34] Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Head Kyrylo Budanov stated that Russian forces deployed elements of the newly created 25th Combined Arms Army (CAA) to the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line with 80 percent of its planned manpower and only 50 percent of the necessary equipment, supporting ISW’s assessment that the 25th CAA is likely combat ineffective due to its rushed deployment.[35] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces made unspecified gains west of Svatove in the direction of the Oskil River and that fighting continued near Synkivka (9km northeast of Kupyansk) and in the direction of Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk) on September 17.[36]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks in the Kreminna area on September 18. The Russian MoD claimed that elements of the Russian Central Grouping of Forces repelled two Ukrainian assaults near Dibrova (7km southwest of Kreminna) and the Serebryanske forest area south of Kreminna.[37] Russian Central Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Alexander Savchuk claimed that Russian forces also repelled a Ukrainian assault near Torske (17km west of Kreminna).[38]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of September 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

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

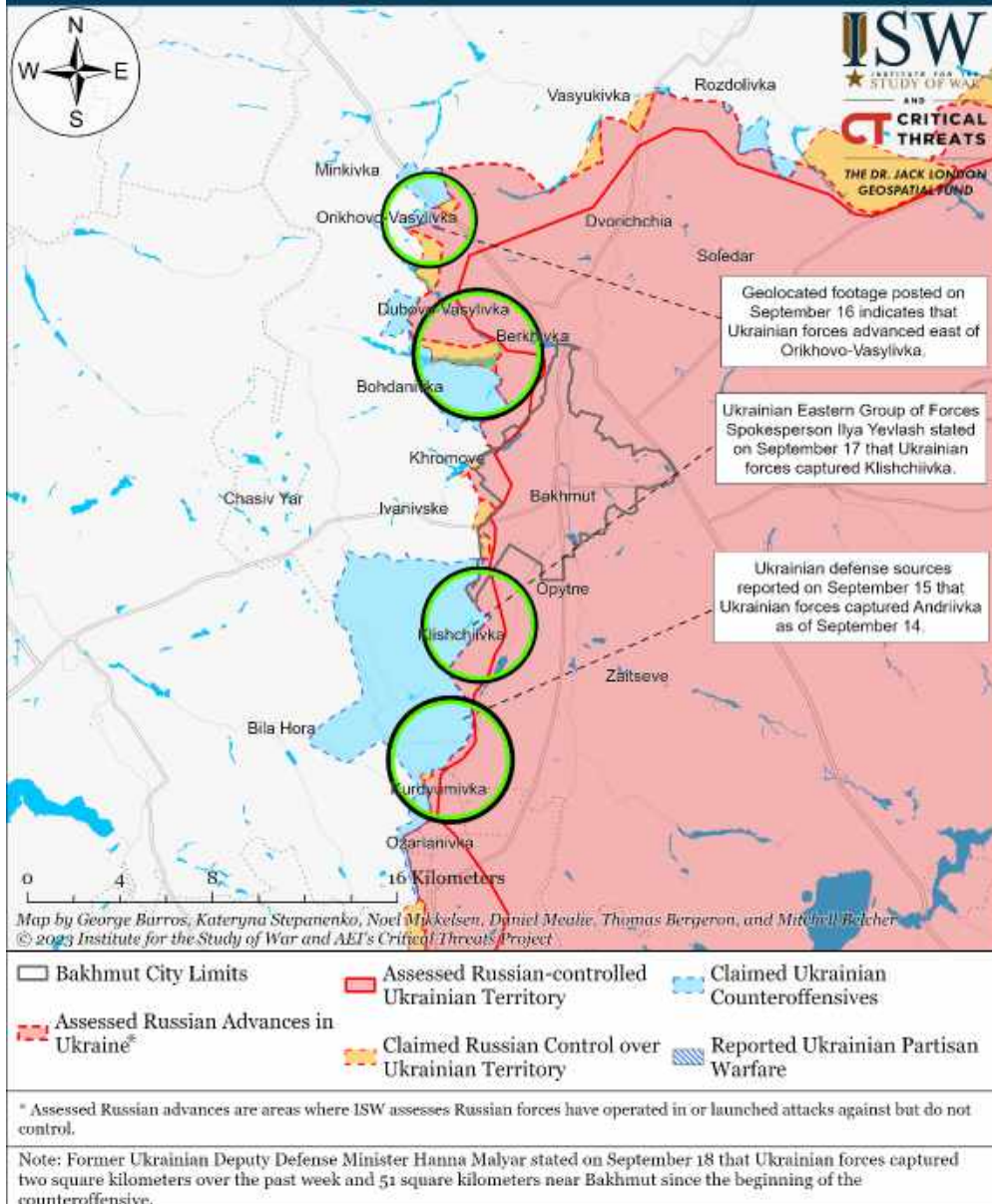
Note: Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on September 18 that Ukrainian forces captured two square kilometers over the past week and 51 square kilometers near Bakhmut since the beginning of the counteroffensive.

## **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)**

Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut area on September 18 and reportedly advanced. Ukrainian Eastern Group of Forces Spokesperson Captain Ilya Yevlash stated that Ukrainian forces achieved unspecified success in the Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut), Bakhmut, and Predtechyne (12km southwest of Bakhmut) directions, and near Andriivka (9km southwest of Bakhmut), Kurdyumivka (12km south of Bakhmut), Bila Hora (12km southwest of Bakhmut), and Opytne (3km southwest of Bakhmut), likely referring to broad tactical directions.[39] Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces recaptured 5.1 square kilometers of territory in the Bakhmut direction in the past week.[40] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces continued assault operations near Klishchiivka[41] Yevlash stated that Ukrainian forces continue efforts to consolidate positions in Klishchiivka and that fighting continues near the railway line east of the settlement.[42] Russian milbloggers continued to claim that Ukrainian forces do not completely control Klishchiivka, claiming instead that the northern part of the settlement remains a contested “gray zone” after Russian forces withdrew from the settlement.[43] Russian milbloggers claimed that heavy fighting is ongoing along the Kurdyumivka-Andriivka-Klishchiivka line, in nearby forest areas, and near the railway line to the east.[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces also attacked near Dubovo-Vasylivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut).[45] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian assaults near Vesele (20km northeast of Bakhmut), Klishchiivka, and Mayorske (20km southwest of Bakhmut).[46] Another Russian milblogger posted footage of unspecified elements of the Russian 106th Airborne (VDV) Division operating near Bakhmut on September 18.[47]

Russian forces continued to counterattack near Bakhmut and reportedly advanced on September 18. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces recaptured some Ukrainian positions in northeastern Klishchiivka during counterattacks, but ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these claims.[48] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Bila Hora, Klishchiivka, and Andriivka.[49] Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully tried to break through Ukrainian positions near Orikhovo-Vasylivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut), Bohdanivka (5km northwest of Bakhmut), Klishchiivka, and Kurdyumivka.[50]

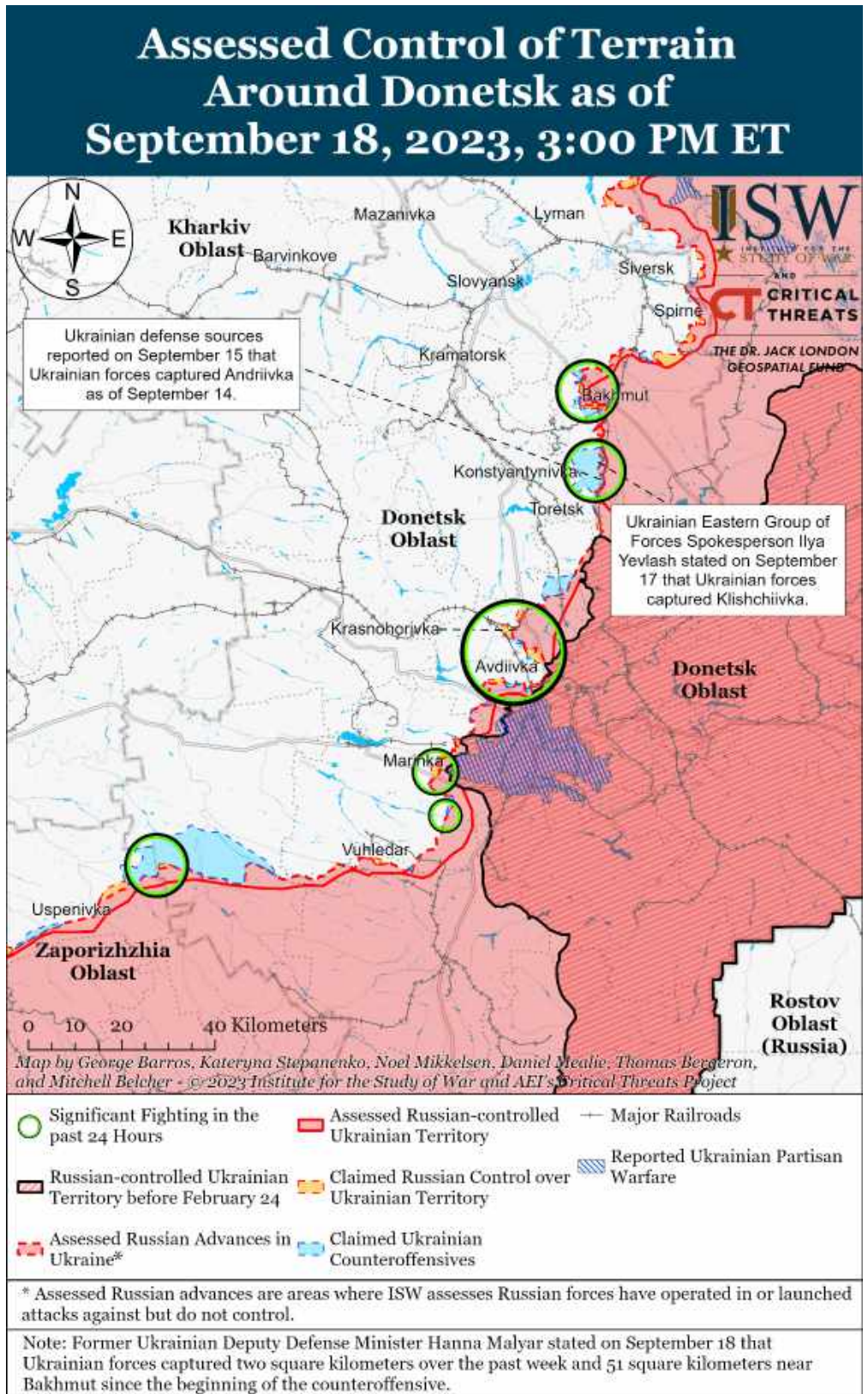
## Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of September 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian forces continued ground attacks on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on September 18 and marginally advanced. Geolocated footage published on September 18 shows that Russian forces marginally advanced north of Avdiivka.[51] Malyar stated that Russian forces conducted unsuccessful offensive actions near Keramik (14km northwest of Avdiivka), Avdiivka, Sieverne (11km southwest of Avdiivka), Marinka (27km southwest of Avdiivka), and Novomykhailivka (36km southwest of Avdiivka).[52] A Russian news aggregator claimed that fighting was ongoing near Opytne (4km south of Avdiivka) on September 17.[53]

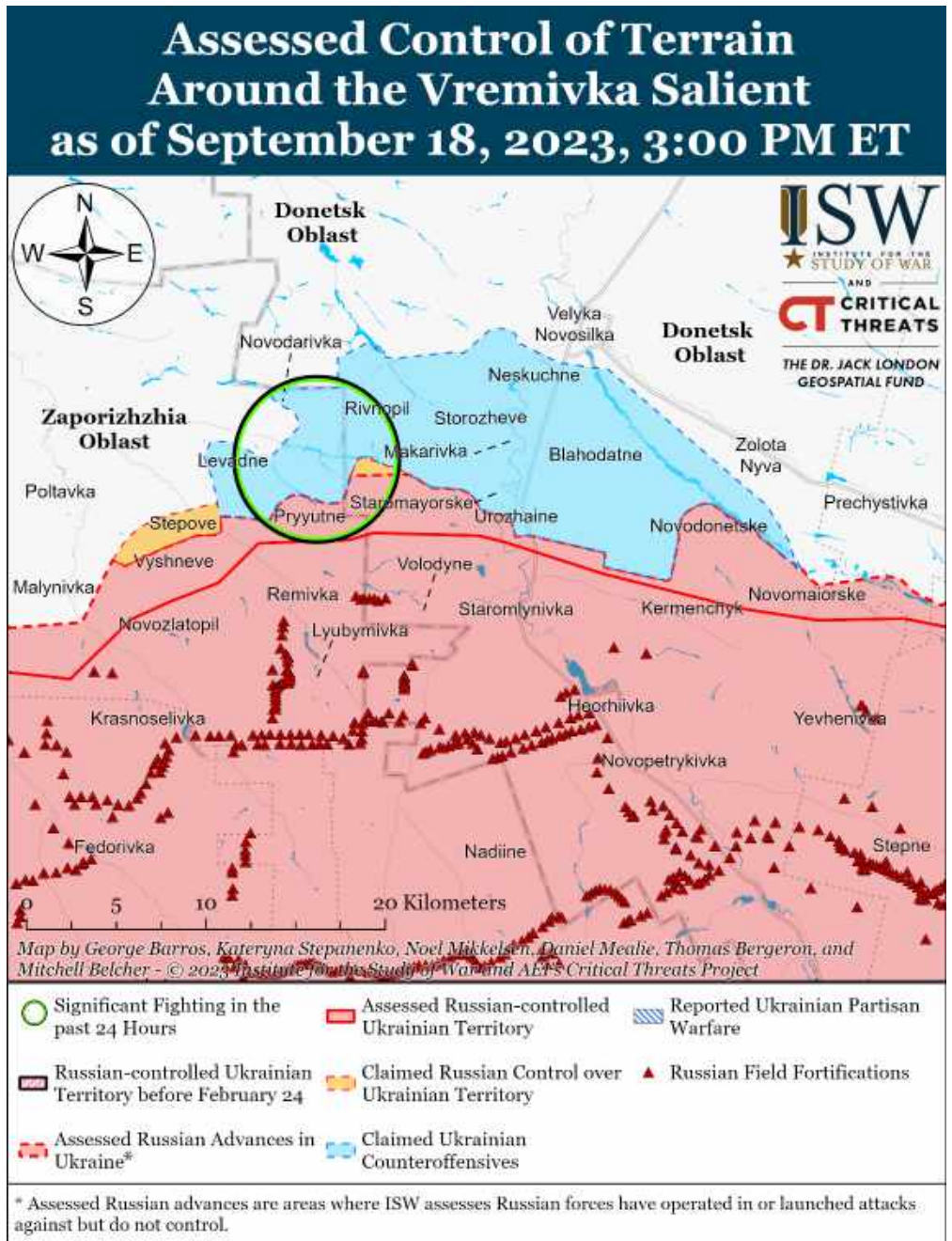


The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian assaults near Marinka and Vodyane (7km southwest of Avdiivka) on the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line on September 18.[54]



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

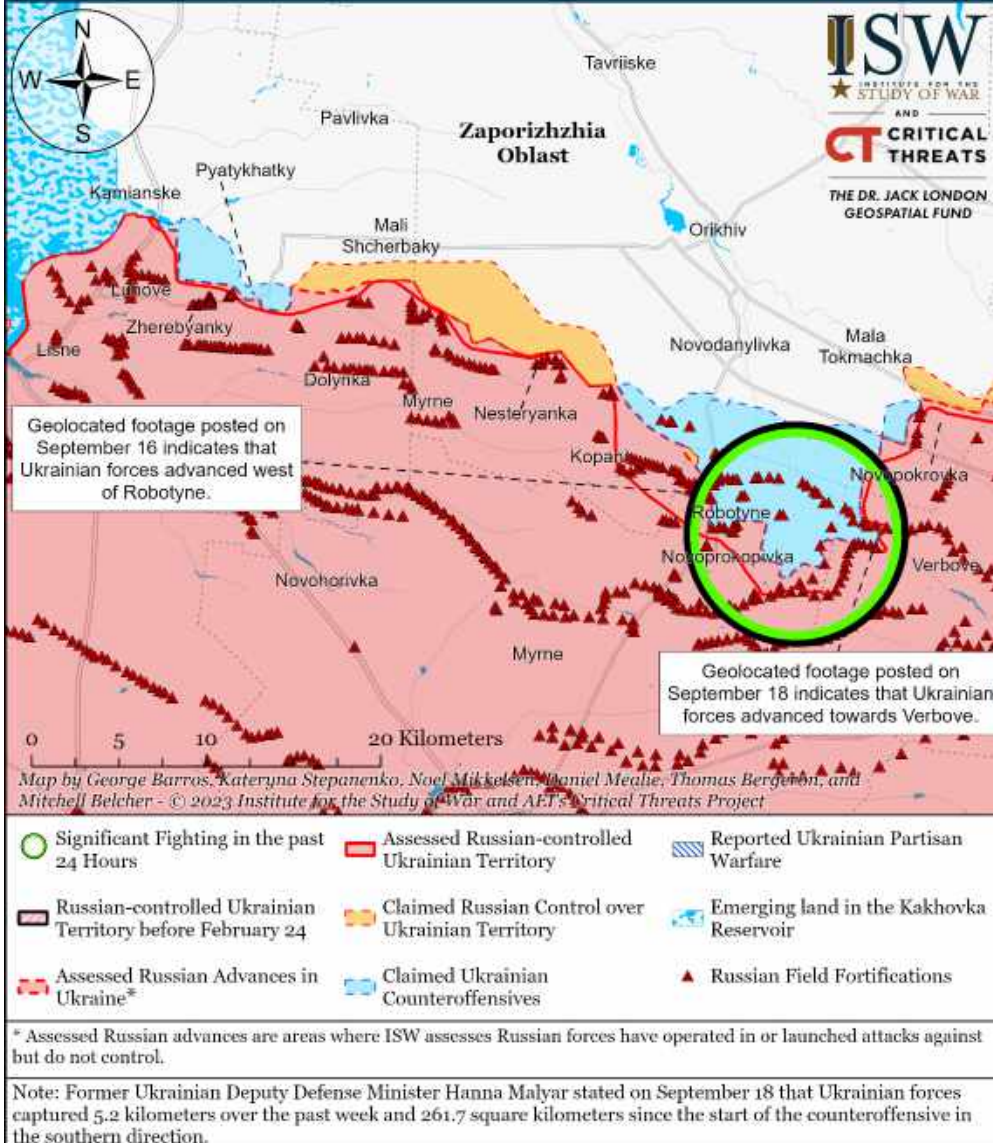
Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area but did not advance on September 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces conducted assaults in the Shakhtarske direction, presumably referring to the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area.[55] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Urozhaine (9km south of Velyka Novosilka), Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka), and Novodonetske (12km southeast of Velyka Novosilka).[56]



Russian forces conducted offensive operations in the western Donetsk-eastern Zaporizhia Oblast border area on September 18 and reportedly recently advanced. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on September 17 that Russian forces control Stepove (22km southwest of Velyka Novosilka), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.[57] Former Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Novodarivka (16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[58] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces attacked near Urozhaine and from Pryutne (16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka) but did not specify an outcome.[59] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian 37th Motorized Rifle Brigade (36th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) and the 127th Motorized Rifle Division (5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) are operating east of Urozhaine and north of Pryutne, respectively.[60]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of September 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

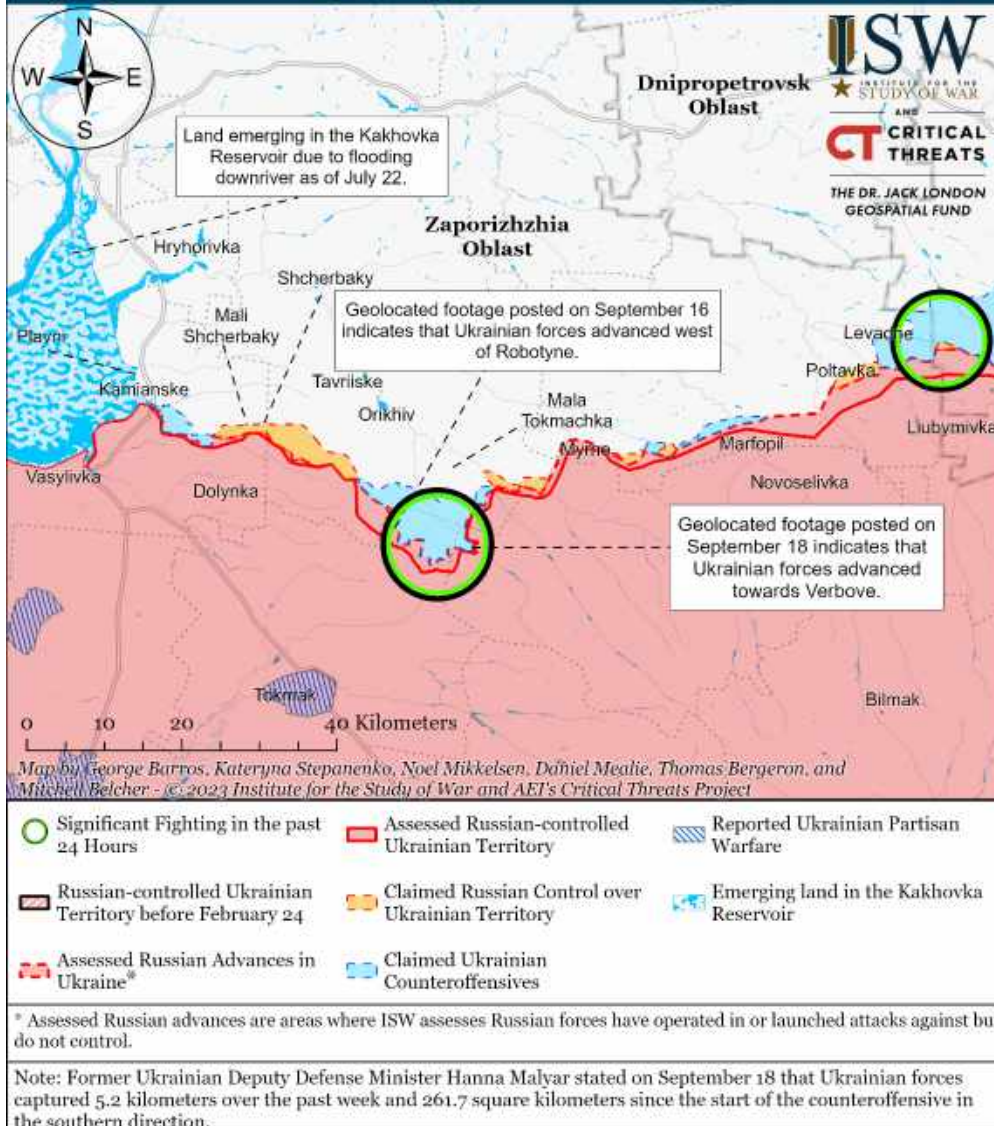


Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast and advanced on September 18. Geolocated footage published on September 18 indicates that Ukrainian forces advanced west of Verbove (18km southeast of Orikhiv).[61] The Ukrainian General Staff and Malyar reported that Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations in the Melitopol (western Zaporizhzhia) direction where they pushed Russian forces out of unspecified positions.[62] Malyar stated that Ukrainian forces have liberated 5.2 square kilometers in the southern direction within the past week and achieved unspecified successes east and south of Robotyne (10km south of Orikhiv).[63] Russian sources claimed on September 17 and 18 that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Novoprokopivka (13km south of Orikhiv), Verbove, and Robotyne.[64]



Russian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhia but did not advance on September 18. The Ukrainian General Staff and Malyar reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Novodanylivka (5km south of Orikhiv) and Robotyne.[65] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces counterattacked west of Verbove but did not specify an outcome.[66] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that at least five regiments from the Russian 7th and 76th Airborne (VDV) Divisions were redeployed to reinforce the 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) near Robotyne recently.[67] The UK MoD assessed that these relatively elite VDV units are highly likely under strength.[68] ISW has been reporting on the presence of three regiments of the 7th VDV Division and two regiments of the 76th VDV Division in this area for some time. A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian 1429th Motorized Rifle Regiment (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) are operating near Robotyne.[69]

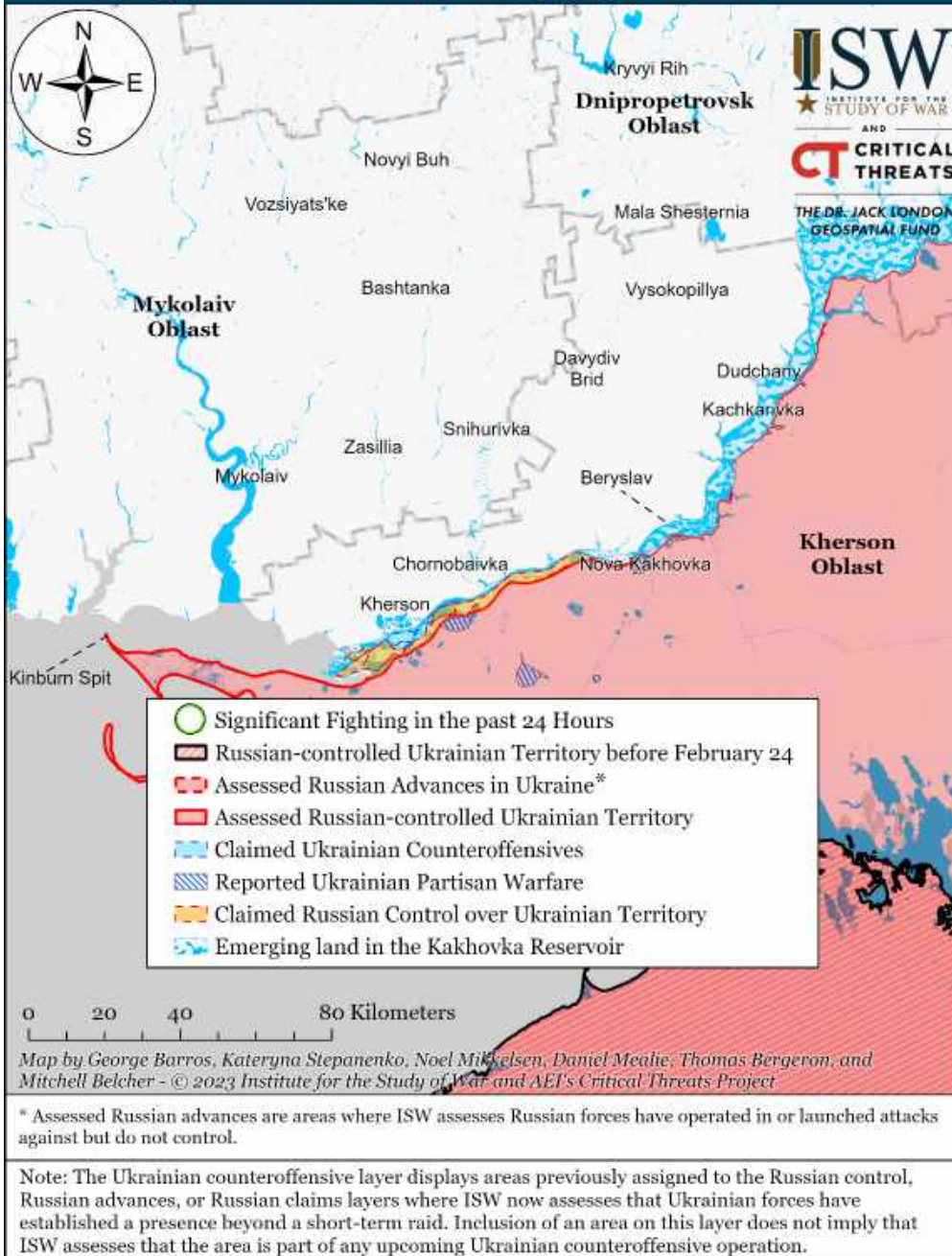
# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of September 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



A Ukrainian strike on September 13 significantly damaged a Russian cruise-missile capable submarine and has very likely rendered it hors de combat for the duration of this war. The Georgia-based Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) posted photographs on September 18 indicating that the Ukrainian attack on the *Rostov-on-Don* Kilo-class submarine in occupied Sevastopol, Crimea on September 13 caused significant damage in two areas of the submarine.[70] CIT amplified an assessment that the Russian Navy will most likely remove the submarine from active duty until the end of the war in Ukraine given the extent of the damage. The *Rostov-on-Don* is one of four cruise missile capable submarines in Russia's Black Sea Fleet.[71] CIT stated that repairing the *Rostov-on-Don* is theoretically possible but that it would be easier for Russia to build a new Kilo-class submarine instead of repairing the *Rostov-on-Don*.[72]

A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces tried to land in occupied Crimea and simultaneously conducted a drone strike on the peninsula on September 17.[73] The milblogger claimed that Russian naval aviation stopped 14 Ukrainian boats headed towards Crimea from Vilkovo, Odesa Oblast, and damaged several of the vessels.[74] The milblogger claimed that Russian air defenses and electronic warfare shot down two Ukrainian drones over Cape Fiolent (11km southwest of Sevastopol), two near Belbek airfield (6km north of Sevastopol), and one over southwestern Sevastopol.[75] The milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces have targeted Crimea almost every day for the past 10 days.[76]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of September 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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



Some Russian sources claimed that former Wagner Group personnel are working closely with Rosgvardia (Russian National Guard) in order to rejoin the hostilities in Ukraine. Russian sources claimed that unspecified Wagner commanders are in “the closest possible contact” with Rosgvardia and that unspecified actors reached an agreement that will allow Wagner fighters to return to fighting in Ukraine as a “separate unit.”[77] Russian authorities may have negotiated with Wagner personnel to rejoin hostilities in Ukraine through subordination or connection to Rosgvardia because many Wagner personnel refused to sign contracts with the Russian MoD.[78] ISW continues to assess that it is unlikely that the Kremlin will restore Wagner as a large-scale quasi-independent organization under a unified command independent of the Kremlin or Russian MoD, which is the only likely form in which Wagner personnel would present a significant threat to the Ukrainian military again.[79]

Russian State Duma Defense Committee Chairman Andrei Kartapolov claimed on September 16 that Russian authorities will not fine individuals for ignoring electronic summonses in the upcoming autumn 2023 conscription cycle.[80] Kartapolov claimed that Russian military authorities will use paper documents as the main method to notify individuals of conscription summonses and that electronic summonses are “additional.”[81] The Russian State Duma approved amendments in July to increase fines for non-compliance on military summonses, however.[82]

A Russian military court convicted a pregnant female Russian soldier for failing to go through the proper channels to receive a medical exemption for service during partial mobilization. Russian news outlet *Kommersant* reported on September 18 that the Vladikavkaz Garrison Military Court sentenced Corporal Madina Kabaloyeva to six years in a general regime colony for failing to appear for military service without a valid reason.[83] *Kommersant* reported that the medical company of Kabaloyeva’s military unit had issued a recommendation for her temporary release from military service due to her pregnancy and responsibility over another child, but that Kabaloyeva did not appear before her unit’s leadership and continued to receive the salary and benefits of an active-duty soldier without serving.[84] *Kommersant* reported that the court will likely defer Kabaloyeva’s sentence due to her child and pregnancy.[85]

Chinese export restrictions have reportedly led to interruptions in the supply of drones and drone parts to Russia. *Kommersant* reported that temporary Chinese export restrictions starting at the end of July have resulted in a shortage of drones weighing over four kilograms and drone components, including thermal imagers.[86] *Kommersant* also stated that Chinese drone sellers are trying to establish parallel imports through transit countries but noted that Kazakhstan recently tightened its import procedure.[87]

### **Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

Russian federal subjects continue to expand their patronage networks in occupied Ukraine. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration reported on September 18 that the Kabardino-Balkaria Republic is constructing a new medical facility in occupied Mykhailivka, Skadovskiy Raion.[88] Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration head Yevgeny Balitsky announced on September 18 that the Tver Oblast government provided Russian occupation authorities with timber for the construction of new Russian fortifications in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[89]

## **Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated on September 18 that fewer than 1,000 Wagner personnel remain in Belarus.[90] The Resistance Center added that 200 Wagner instructors in Belarus are training Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs and Ministry of Defense personnel.[91]

**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.**

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