Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, May 25 Kateryna Stepanenko, Karolina Hird, Frederick W. Kagan, and George Barros May 25, 7:15 pm ET

Some pro-Russian milbloggers on Telegram continued to criticize the Kremlin for appalling treatment of forcefully mobilized Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR) servicemen—contradicting Russian information campaigns about progress of the Russian special military operation. Former Russian Federal Security Service officer Igor Girkin (also known by the alias Igor Strelkov) amplified a critique to his 360,000 followers from a smaller milblogger discussing a video wherein a DNR battalion appealed to DNR Head Denis Pushilin about maltreatment of forcefully mobilized forces.¹ The milblogger blamed Russian leadership, not Pushilin, for beginning the invasion with insufficient reserves and unprepared, forcefully mobilized forces. The milblogger added that Russia did not provide the soldiers of its proxy republics with new weapons, despite claiming that Ukrainian forces prepared to attack occupied Donbas areas for a year prior to Russian invasion. The milblogger also claimed that the Kremlin failed to mobilize and adequately prepare the next batch of reserves, while Ukrainian forces are successfully preparing their troops for counteroffensives. Girkin also criticized the Kremlin for failing to pay the DNR battalion for three months. Some milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces staged the video, but the video still gathered attention of pro-Russian Telegram users.²

The incident highlights a continuing shift in the Russian-language milblogger information space regardless of the video's authenticity. Milbloggers would likely have either attacked or dismissed such a video loudly and in near-unison earlier in the war, when they all generally focused on presenting optimistic pro-Russian and anti-Ukrainian narratives. The response to this video in the Russian-language milblogger space demonstrates the strong resonance anti-Kremlin narratives can now have. It is impossible to know what effect this change in this information space might have on general perceptions of the war in Russia, but it is one of the most visible and noteworthy inflections in the attitudes of previously strongly pro-Kremlin ostensibly independent Russian voices speaking to Russians that we have yet seen.

Today's statement by DNR Militia Head Eduard Basurin explaining that Russian forces would focus on creating "smaller cauldrons" rather than on a single large encirclement is likely in part a response to a critique that surfaced both in the milblogger space and in the Russian Duma that Russian forces had failed to form and reduce "cauldrons" of the sort they used in 2014.³ Basurin's statement, along with other changes in the ways in which Russian officials have spoken about cauldrons and Russian operations in the east following those critiques suggest that the Russian and proxy leadership is sensitive to shifts in this information space.⁴

Russian forces are increasingly facing a deficiency in high-precision weaponry. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that due to an increasing lack of high-precision weapons Russian forces are seeking other methods of striking critical infrastructure and have intensified the use of aircraft to support offensives. The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) noted that up to 60% of Russia's high-precision stockpile has already been exhausted, which is consistent with previous reports by Western defense officials that Russian forces have been increasingly relying on "dumb bombs" because they are facing challenges replenishing their supplies of precision munitions in part due to sanctions targeting Russia's defense-industrial production. A lack of high-precision weapons will likely result in an increase in indiscriminate attacks on critical and civilian infrastructure.

The Kremlin is attempting to expand the pool of Russian passport-holders in occupied areas. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on May 25 that will simplify the procedure for obtaining a Russian passport within Kherson and Zaporizhia Oblasts.⁷ This renewed campaign of so-called "mass

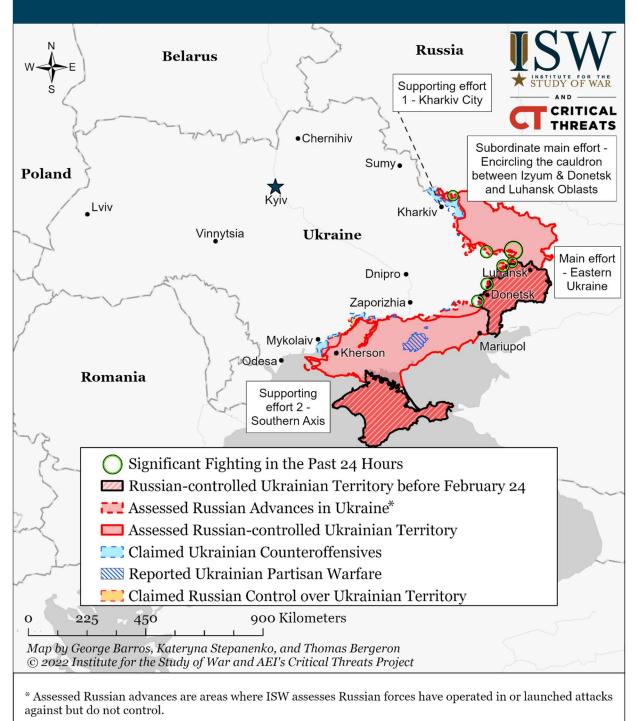
passportization" is occurring in occupied territories and likely represents an effort to set conditions for some sort of post-conflict political arrangement (the precise form of which Putin prefers remains unclear) through manipulating access to Russian citizenship.8 Occupation authorities may additionally attempt to exploit this new decree to carry out covert mobilization in occupied areas, as having a Russian passport would make conscription-eligible residents of occupied territories subject to forced military service.

The Kremlin and Russian military commanders are introducing new regulations aimed at addressing the diminishing level of combat-ready reserves. The Russian State Duma and the Russian Federation Council passed a bill raising the maximum age for voluntary enlistment into the Russian military from 40 to 50.9 Russian Telegram channels also reported that Russian leadership forced operational officers and commanders of the Russian Border Guards of southern Russian regions including Rostov Oblast and occupied Crimea to indefinitely cancel all summer vacations—a rather unsurprising step in light of the military situation in principle, but an indication of the next source of manpower to which Putin will apparently turn. Russian Border Guards will reportedly deploy to training grounds for unspecified exercises in late May. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces are forming new reserve units within the Southern Military District.¹¹

Key Takeaways

- Russian forces prioritized advances east and west of Popasna in order to cut Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) southwest of Severodonetsk and complete encirclement efforts in Luhansk Oblast.
- Russian forces have likely entered Lyman and may use this foothold to coordinate with advances southeast of Izyum to launch an offensive on Siversk.
- Russian forces may start the Battle of Severodonetsk prior to completely cutting off Ukrainian GLOCs southwest and northwest of Severodonetsk.
- Russian forces struck Zaporizhzhia City in an attempt to disrupt a key logistics hub for Ukrainian forces operating in the east.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 25, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

ISW has updated its assessment of the four primary efforts Russian forces are engaged in at this time. We have stopped coverage of Mariupol as a separate effort since the city's fall. We had added a new section on activities in Russian-occupied areas:

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

Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

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

The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Militia Head Eduard Basurin confirmed that Russian forces have adopted an approach of creating smaller cauldrons to deprive Ukrainian troops of logistics and reinforcements, rather than pursuing a single large-scale encirclement on the Donetsk Oblast administrative border. ¹² ISW has previously assessed that Russian commanders have likely abandoned the objective of completing a large-scale encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Donbas. ¹³

Russian forces prioritized three advances east and west of Popasna in an effort to cut Ukrainian GLOCs southwest of Severodonetsk and complete the Luhansk Oblast cauldron. Russian forces continued to advance east of Popasna to seize settlements on the T1303 highway to Lysyschansk, northeast to cut Ukrainian access to T1302 highway from Bakhmut to Lysychansk, and southwest along the T0504 highway from Popasna toward Bakhmut. Russian forces reportedly made advances towards Bakhmut from Svitlodarsk, a settlement just north of Debaltseve, and continued heavy shelling likely in preparations for a ground offensive. 15

Russian forces seem to be prioritizing efforts to cut the two highways to Severodonetsk over launching offensive operations on Bakhmut at this time. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai refuted reports that Russian forces had cut off or blocked the T1302 highway on May 25. Russian forces are unlikely to completely isolate Ukrainian forces from GLOCs just by seizing the southwestern T1303 and T1302 highways to Severodonetsk given the network of alternate if smaller roads in the region and will need to block or disrupt Bakhmut and Siversk to complete the Luhansk cauldron.

Russian efforts to isolate Severodonetsk and Lysychansk may not be well synchronized in time and space with an impending direct Russian assault on Severdonetsk, although it is too soon to tell. The Russians are likely some days away from even cutting off the GLOCs to Severdonetsk and Lysychansk, and it would likely take some time for the disruption of those GLOCs to affect the cities' defenders' abilities to continue fighting. The intensity of Russian artillery and air attack, however, combined with the massing of Russian forces drawn from elsewhere in theater for the assault on Severodonetsk suggests that the assault could be launched before the GLOCs have been cut or before their disruption could have a material effect. The drive to cut the GLOCs could also be an effort to

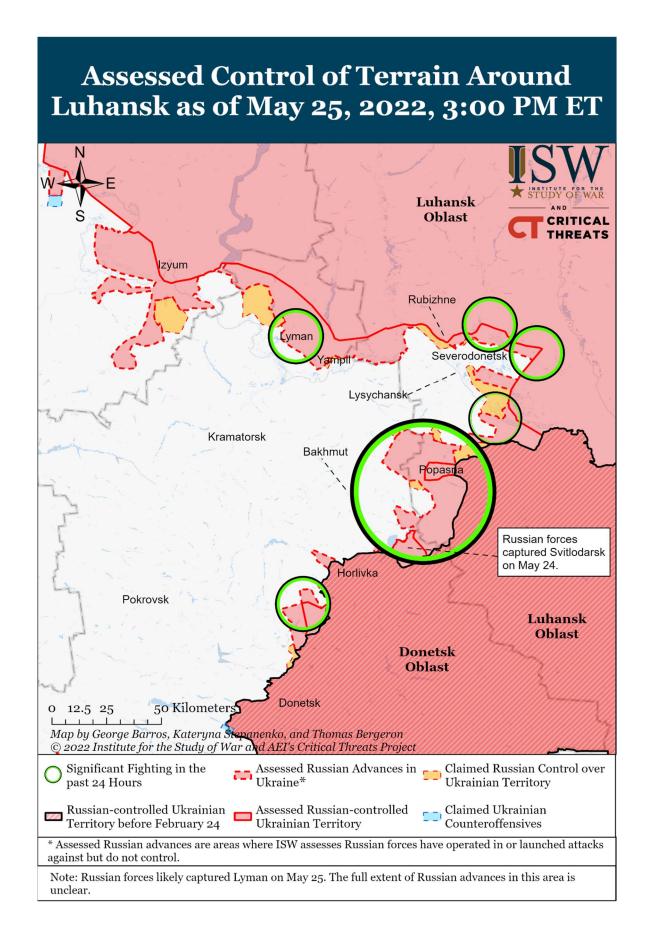
create an outer encirclement ring, however, to prevent Ukrainian forces from attempting to reinforce Severodonetsk as it is attacked or to relieve it if it is isolated or falls.

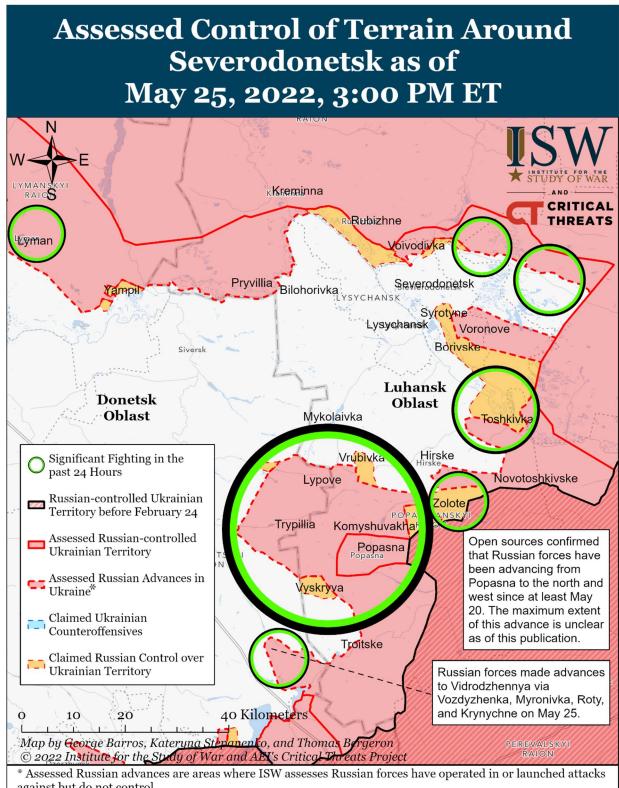
Russian forces may need to conduct a ground offensive on Severodonetsk in upcoming days to maintain their pace after committing a significant portion of personnel, artillery, aviation, and logistics to the front. The Ukrainian Defense Ministry reported that Russian forces conducted offensive operations in the vicinity of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk on May 25. Haidai stated that Russian forces will lose the momentum of their heavy shelling and motivation if they do not launch an attack on Severodonetsk by Sunday. Haidai reported that Russian forces already committed over 10,000 troops - approximately 25 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) composed on 300 to 500 servicemen each - and military equipment including S-400 surface-to-air missile systems. Russian military commanders likely had to withdraw these forces from other axes, slowing down Russian advances in Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Kharkiv Oblasts. Russian forces have also reportedly reached mortar range of Severodonetsk.

Russian forces continued unsuccessful attempts to improve tactical positions in the direction of Slovyansk and advance southeast of Izyum on May 25. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to launch another ground assault on Dovhenke, approximately 18km south of Izyum.²³ Russian forces also tried to advance towards Lyman from the Izyum area but did not gain any new ground from this direction.²⁴

Social media videos of Russian soldiers claiming to have entered Lyman from the east suggest that Ukrainian forces could have withdrawn from the settlement on May 25. Russian forces in Izyum could possibly try to coordinate efforts with Russian units in Lyman to launch an offensive on Siversk, a settlement located on a major highway 30km west of Severodonetsk. An offensive on Siversk would assist Russian forces in cutting Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Severodonetsk from the northwest.

Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to seize settlements east and west of Avdiivka, and did not achieve any territorial gains on Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border.²⁶ Russian forces reportedly shelled railway tracks near Avdiivka on May 25, likely to further shake up Ukrainian fortifications in the area.²⁷ Unconfirmed social media reports reiterated that Russian forces made advances to encircle Ukrainian positions from the northwest, but ISW cannot independently confirm these claims.²⁸



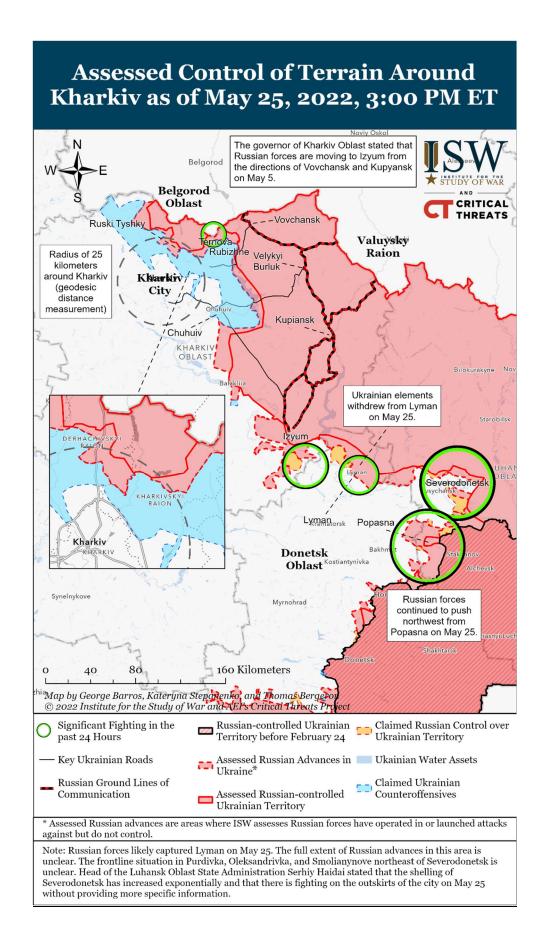


against but do not control.

Note: Russian forces likely captured Lyman on May 25. The full extent of Russian advances in this area is unclear. The frontline situation in Purdivka, Oleksandrivka, and Smolianynove northeast of Severodonetsk is unclear. Head of the Luhansk Oblast State Administration Serhiy Haidai stated that the shelling of Severodonetsk has increased exponentially and that there is fighting on the outskirts of the city on May 25 without providing more specific information.

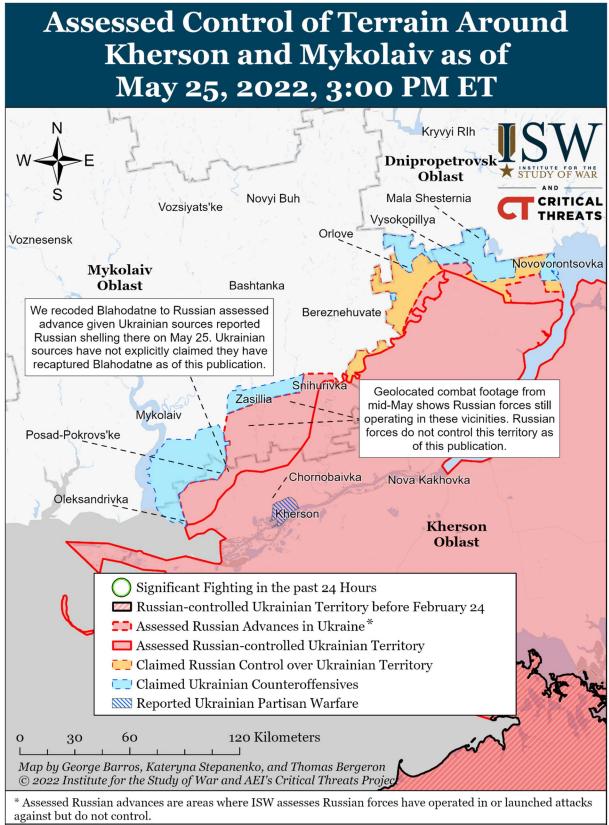
<u>Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv City (Russian objective: Withdraw forces to the north and defend ground lines of communication (GLOCs) to Izyum)</u>

Russian forces intensified artillery attacks against Ukrainian positions and focused on maintaining and regaining control of territory north of Kharkiv City on May 25.²⁹ The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces shelled Ternova, Ruski Tyshky, and Rubizhne and that Russian troops attempted a ground offensive near Ternova, indicating that control of settlements in northern Kharkiv Oblast remains contested.³⁰ Russian forces did not make any confirmed advances on this axis on May 25.



<u>Supporting Effort #2—Southern Axis</u> (Objective: Defend Kherson against Ukrainian counterattacks)

Russian forces focused on improving their tactical positions and conducted air, rocket, missile, and artillery strikes along the Southern Axis on May 25.31 Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that Russian troops clashed with Ukrainian defense in northeastern Mykolaiv Oblast while attempting to advance towards Kryvyi Rih.32 Russian forces conducted a rocket strike against residential areas of Zaporizhzhia City, which the Russian Defense Ministry claimed was an attack on Ukrainian production workshops at the Motor Sich plant.33 The direct attack on Zaporizhzhia City is likely intended to disrupt a key logistics hub for the Ukrainian army operating in the east. Russian forces additionally fired on areas Kryvyi Rih and elsewhere in Dnipropetrovsk Oblast, Mykolaiv, and Kherson Oblasts.34 Ukrainian Southern Operational Command noted that the Russian grouping in Crimea continued to bolster air defense and deployed two additional S-400 anti-aircraft missile divisions to the northwestern part of Crimea.35



Note: We recoded Novopavlivka in northern Kherson Oblast to Ukrainian counteroffensives given the Ukrainian General Staff Stated on May 25 that Russian forces fired upon Novopavlivka, indicating that Russian forces are not present there.

<u>Activity in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of occupied areas; set conditions for potential annexation into the Russian Federation or some other future political arrangement of Moscow's choosing)</u>

Occupation authorities continued to take measures to consolidate administrative control of occupied territories on May 25. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on May 25 that simplifies the procedure for obtaining Russian passports in Zaporizhia and Kherson Oblasts.³⁶ The Ukrainian Resistance Center referred to this decree as an attempt at "mass passportization," which is likely an indicator that occupation authorities could seek to facilitate annexation directly into the Russian Federation and strengthen administrative control over occupied areas.³⁷ Russian occupiers in Kherson Oblast are reportedly trying to force locals into occupied areas to cooperate with occupation organs and are attempting to mobilize Ukrainians into the Russian army.³⁸ Russian forces around occupied Berdyansk and Vasylivka are reportedly blocking exits from the cities with concrete slabs, indicating that occupation authorities seek to stem the flow of people from occupied territories and allow for the implementation of further controls.³⁹

Russian forces continued to strengthen occupation control in Mariupol on May 25. The Russian Defense Ministry claimed that Russian and proxy forces completed the demining of the seaport and that the city is beginning to function on more regular basis.⁴⁰ Advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol Petro Andryushchenko stated that authorities of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) are beginning a new policy in Mariupol wherein citizens will be eligible to directly obtain Russian passports without obtaining DNR passports.⁴¹ Such "passportization" measures may be intended to further set conditions for the direct annexation of Mariupol into the Russian Federation. Occupation authorities additionally continued filtration and deportation measures in Mariupol under the supervision of Federal State Security (FSB) agents and Russian "volunteers."⁴²

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces are likely reinforcing their grouping north of Kharkiv City to prevent further advances of the Ukrainian counteroffensive towards the Russian border. Russan forces may commit elements of the 1st Tank Army to Northern Kharkiv in the near future.
- Russian forces are prioritizing cutting off two major highways to Severodonetsk but may start to storm the city before they successfully cut GLOCs.
- Occupation forces in Mariupol will continue to strengthen administrative control of the city but are likely unsure as to what the ultimate annexation policy will be.
- Russian forces are likely preparing for Ukrainian counteroffensives and settling in for protracted operations in Southern Ukraine.

https://twitter.com/JackDetsch/status/1523687805033267201

¹ https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-24; https://t.me/strelkovii/2592

² https://donrf dot livejournal.com/1196948.html

³ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-17; https://t.me/swodki/103269

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⁶ https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/319684610342966; https://twitter.com/JackDetsch/status/1524065120426541057;

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⁸ https://sprotyv dot mod.gov.ua/2022/05/25/okupanty-mayut-problemy-iz-prymusovoyu-pasportyzacziyeyu-harkivshhyny/

⁹ https://t.me/bazabazon/11750; https://t.me/bazabazon/11752

¹⁰ https://t.me/bazabazon/11748

¹¹ https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/324613886518363

¹² https://t.me/swodki/103269

¹³ https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-15

¹⁴ https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/325028756476876;

¹⁵ <u>https://ria</u> dot ru/20220525/donbass-1790542082.html; <u>https://tass</u> dot ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/14719677; <u>https://t.me/millnr/8646</u>; <u>https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1529453704767848452</u>;

¹⁶ https://t.me/swodki/103177; https://t.me/swodki/103141

¹⁷ https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2905

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¹⁹ https://armyinform dot com.ua/2022/05/25/za-pidtrymky-aviacziyi-protyvnyk-vede-nastupalni-diyi-shhob-otochyty-nashi-pidrozdily-i-vyjty-na-adminkordon-luganskoyi-oblasti/

²⁰ https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2901; https://t.me/stranaua/4388

²¹ https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2901; https://t.me/stranaua/4388

²² https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2901; https://t.me/stranaua/4388

²³ https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/325028756476876

²⁴ https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/325028756476876;

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²⁵ https://twitter.com/GirkinGirkin/status/1529446538342281221;

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²⁷ https://twitter.com/bamr69/status/1529132062854234113

²⁸ https://twitter.com/bamr69/status/1529132062854234113

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³¹ https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/325028756476876;

https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/324613886518363 32 https://www.facebook.com/okPivden/videos/550116773154781/

³³ https://t.me/mod_russia/16109; https://t.me/swodki/103154; https://t.me/zoda_gov_ua/8221;

³⁴ https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=710953073518199;

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³⁹ https://t.me/zoda gov ua/8217

⁴⁰ https://t.me/mod_russia/16109; https://t.me/readovkanews/34883

⁴¹ https://t.me/stranaua/43949; https://t.me/stranaua/43949; https://hromadske dot fua/posts/u-mariupoli-okupacijna-vlada-pochala-rozdavati-rosijski-pasporti-radnik-mera

⁴² https://t.me/andriyshTime/1060; https://t.me/andriyshTime/1058