

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

Mason Clark, Karolina Hird, and Kateryna Stepanenko

May 7, 6:45 pm ET

The Ukrainian counteroffensive northeast of Kharkiv is making significant progress and will likely advance to the Russian border in the coming days or weeks. Russian forces may be conducting a limited withdrawal in the face of successful Ukrainian attacks and reportedly destroyed three bridges to slow the Ukrainian advance. Armies generally only destroy bridges if they have largely decided they will not attempt to cross the river in the other direction anytime soon; Russian forces are therefore unlikely to launch operations to retake the northeast outskirts of Kharkiv liberated by Ukrainian forces in the near future. Russian forces previously destroyed several bridges during their retreat from Chernihiv Oblast—as did Ukrainian forces withdrawing in the face of the Russian offensive in the initial days of the war.

This Ukrainian offensive is likely intended to push Russian forces out of artillery range of Kharkiv city and drive to the border of Russia's Belgorod Oblast. As ISW previously forecasted, the Ukrainian counteroffensive is forcing Russian units intended for deployment elsewhere to redeploy to the Kharkiv front to halt Ukrainian attacks. Given the current rate of Ukrainian advances, Russian forces may be unable to prevent Ukrainian forces from reaching the Russian border, even with additional reinforcements. Ukrainian forces are not directly threatening Russian lines of communication to Izyum (and ISW cannot verify claims of a separate Ukrainian counteroffensive toward Izyum at this time), but the Ukrainian counteroffensive demonstrates promising Ukrainian capabilities and may set conditions for further offensive operations into northeastern Kharkiv Oblast.

By all indications, Russian forces will announce the creation of a Kherson People's Republic or possibly forcibly annex Kherson Oblast in the near future and are intensifying occupation measures in Mariupol. Russian forces are reportedly increasing their security presence in both Kherson and Mariupol, including withdrawing personnel from frontline combat units to protect Russian dignitaries in Mariupol. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Leader Denis Pushilin arrived in Kherson on May 6, and local occupation officials stated the region will “strive to become a subject of Russia” and “will resemble something close to Crimea in terms of the pace of development,” echoing longstanding rhetoric used by Russia's existing proxies in eastern Ukraine. As ISW has previously assessed, the Kremlin will likely form illegal proxy republics or directly annex occupied areas of southern and eastern Ukraine to cement its occupation administration and attempt to permanently strip these territories from Ukraine.

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces destroyed several bridges to slow Ukrainian forces and may be conducting a limited withdrawal northeast of Kharkiv city in the face of the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive.**
- **Ukrainian forces are making significant progress around Kharkiv and will likely advance to the Russian border in the coming days.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued to repel Russian advances toward Barvinvoke and Russian forces have likely abandoned efforts to drive directly southeast toward Slovyansk. ISW cannot confirm claims of a Ukrainian counteroffensive toward Izyum at this time.**
- **Russian forces claimed to capture Popasna on May 7 but remain largely stalled in eastern Ukraine.**

- **The Ukrainian government confirmed the last remaining civilians trapped in the Azovstal plant evacuated on May 7, though the remaining Ukrainian defenders appear unlikely to surrender. ISW will likely be unable to report any discrete changes in control of terrain until Russian forces capture the plant as a whole due to the poor information environment in Mariupol.**
- **By all indications, Russian forces will announce the creation of a Kherson People's Republic or possibly forcibly annex Kherson Oblast in the coming weeks to cement its occupation administration and attempt to permanently strip these territories from Ukraine.**
- **Russian forces continued to target Odesa with cruise missile strikes and conduct false-flag attacks in Transnistria over the past several days.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of May 7, 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 five primary efforts Russian forces are engaged in at this time:

- Main effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and four supporting efforts);
- Subordinate main effort- Encirclement of Ukrainian troops in the cauldron between Izyum and Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts
- Supporting effort 1—Mariupol;
- Supporting effort 2—Kharkiv City;
- Supporting effort 3—Southern axis;
- Supporting effort 4—Sumy and northeastern Ukraine.

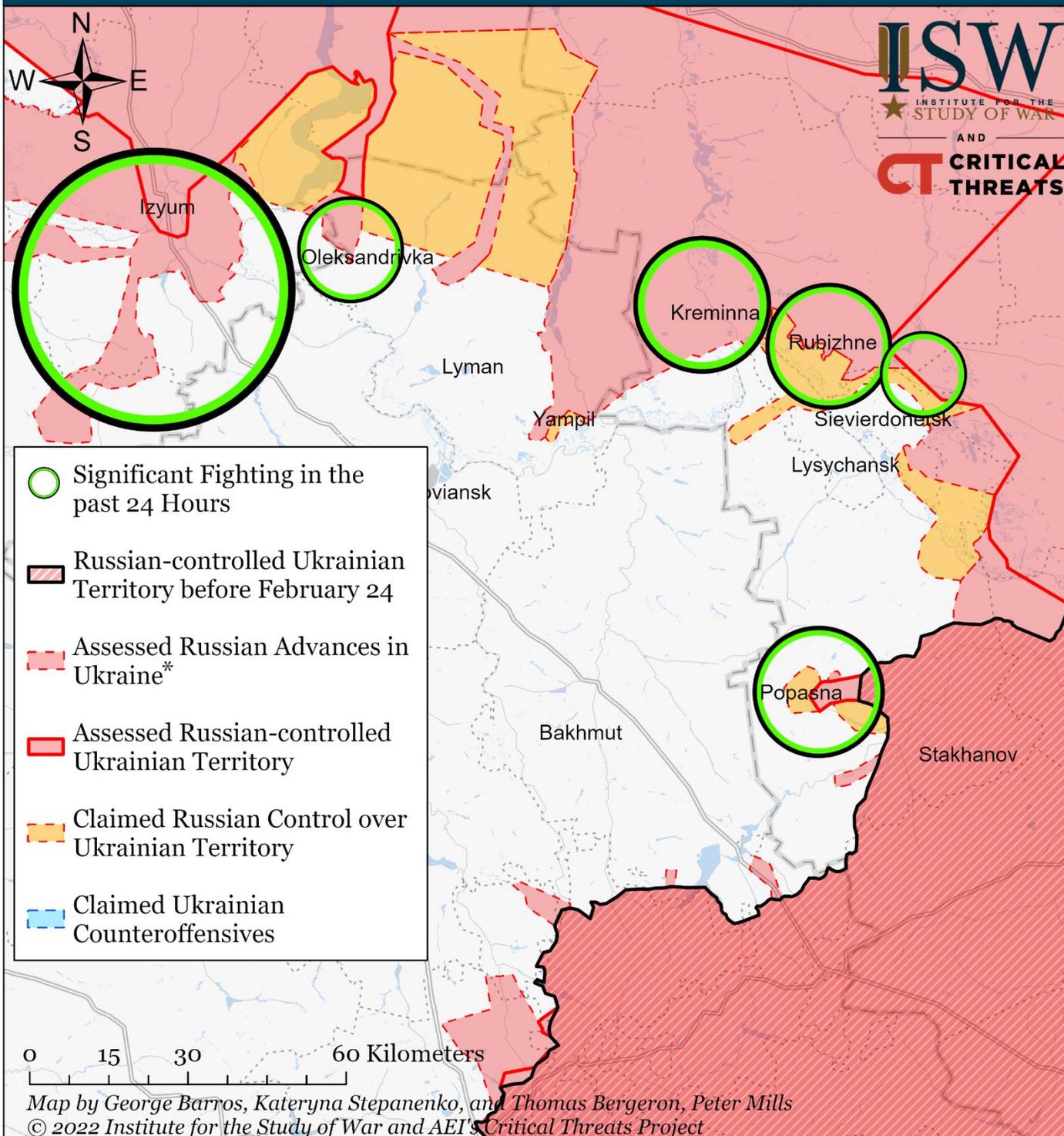
Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

Subordinate Main Effort—Southern Kharkiv, Donetsk, and 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)

Ukrainian forces continued to repel Russian advances toward Barvinok (southwest of Izyum) on May 7, and Russian forces have likely abandoned efforts to drive directly southeast toward Slovyansk. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces launched an unsuccessful attack on Virnopillya (approximately 25 km southwest of Izyum) on May 7 and images on social media depicted several destroyed Russian armored vehicles and tanks.¹ Ukrainian forces likely repelled further Russian attacks directly west of Izyum in the villages of Zavody and Velyka Komyshevka, as evidenced by drone footage released by Ukrainian forces.² Satellite imagery depicted fires just northwest of Izyum on May 6 that may indicate ongoing shelling.³ However, ISW has not observed any footage or imagery of Ukrainian advances, the Ukrainian General Staff has not claimed any Ukrainian attack toward Izyum, and we cannot confirm at this time if Ukrainian forces are conducting an offensive toward Izyum concurrent with the ongoing offensive around Kharkiv, as discussed below.⁴ ISW will continue to monitor the area and provide updates if we obtain concrete indicators of a Ukrainian counteroffensive in this area.

Russian forces continued ground attacks against the same towns they have focused offensive operations on for several weeks—Rubizhne, Avdiivke, Oleksandrivka, Kreminna, and Shandryholove—and possibly captured Popasna on May 7.⁵ Russian forces continued to shell along the entire line of contact in eastern Ukraine, reportedly attempting to interdict Ukrainian movements.⁶ The LNR and pro-Russian Telegram channels claimed that Russian forces captured Popasna on May 7, though ISW cannot independently verify this claim.⁷ Social media users previously reported likely elements of the 68th Tank Regiment (of the 150th Motor Rifle Division) amassing east of Popasna on May 6.⁸ If Russian forces have successfully captured Popasna (or do so in the coming days), they will likely attempt to advance further west toward Bakhmut before pivoting north toward Siversk or Slovyansk, though Russian forces are unlikely to rapidly take these settlements.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk as of May 7, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Thomas Bergeron, Peter Mills
 © 2022 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

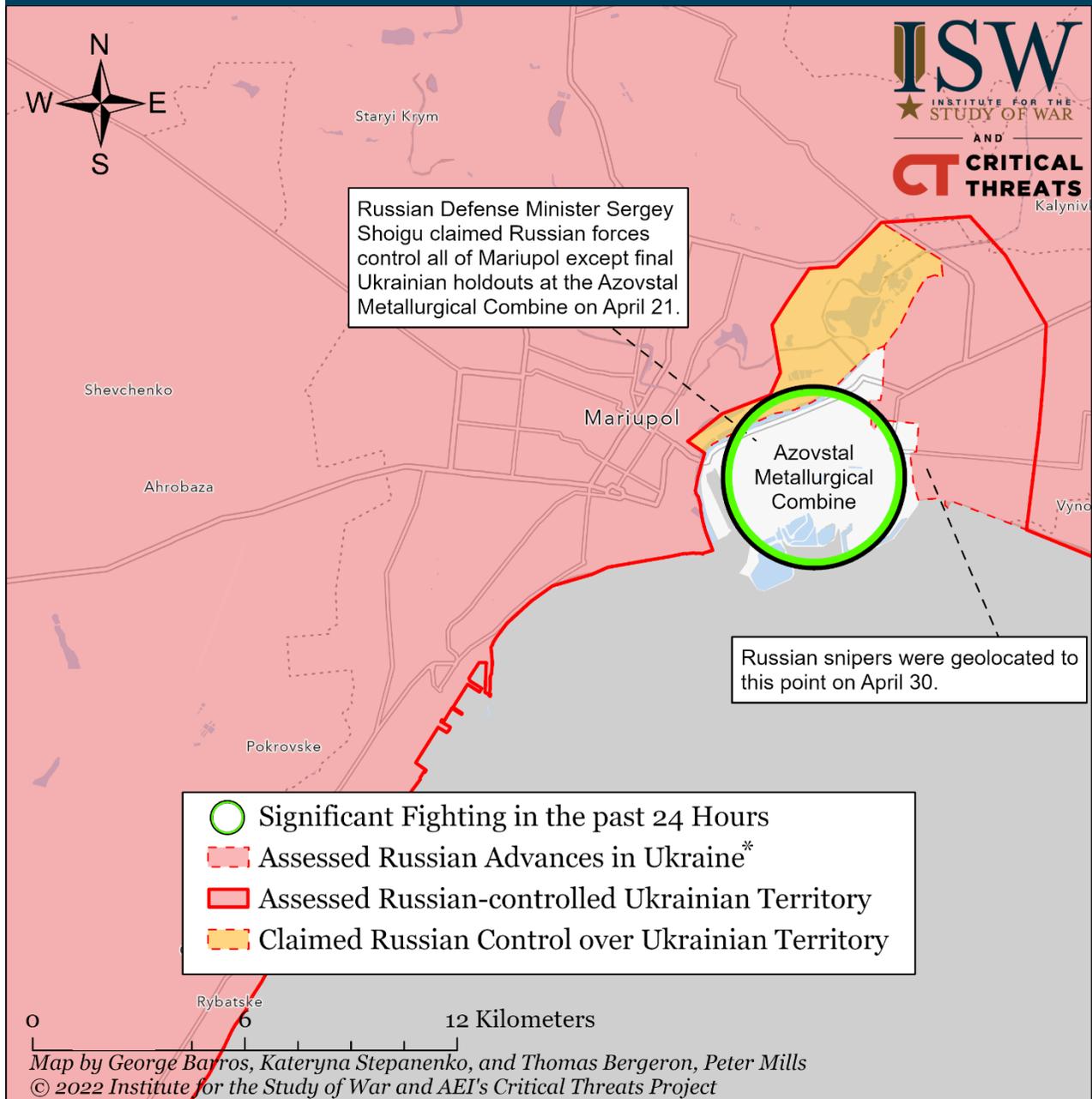
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

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

The Ukrainian government confirmed that the last remaining civilians trapped in the Azovstal plant evacuated on May 7, though an unknown number of Ukrainian defenders remain in the facility.⁹ The DNR and Russian media falsely claimed that some Ukrainian defenders surrendered to Russian forces under white flags, but Ukrainian units inside the plant denied the claim and stated both sides raised white flags to mark the evacuation route for civilians.¹⁰ The remaining Ukrainian units in Azovstal appear unlikely to surrender, and Russian forces continued assaults on the facility.¹¹ We will likely be unable to report any discrete changes in control of terrain until Russian forces capture the plant as a whole due to the poor information environment in Mariupol and lack of direct imagery or video of fighting inside the facility.

Ukrainian sources reported further Russian preparations for a Victory Day celebration in Mariupol, including increased security. The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on May 7 that Russian commanders are removing officers from combat, including reportedly the command staff of the 71st Motor Rifle Regiment, to protect Kremlin officials and propagandists in Mariupol.¹² The GUR also claimed to have intercepted communications between Russian servicemen complaining of the stupidity of their commanders and the humiliation of being withdrawn for guard duty, but ISW cannot verify either of these claims. Advisor to the Mayor of Mariupol Petro Andryushchenko separately claimed on May 7 that the Russian occupation forces in Mariupol are distributing ribbons and invitations for a May 9 parade in the city center and Primorsky Park.¹³ Andryushchenko further reported Mariupol residents are being forced to clear bodies and rubble in order to receive food from Russian forces.¹⁴

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Mariupol as of May 7, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



The Kremlin declared victory in Mariupol on April 21 after capturing the city besides Ukrainian holdouts in the encircled Azovstal Metallurgical Combine. Russian forces reportedly conducted an assault on the remaining Ukrainian defenders at Azovstal on May 4. Russian war reporters filmed some Russian elements redeploying from Mariupol northward on April 24 and April 25. The Kremlin will spin the (still incomplete) capture of Mariupol into a major victory in Ukraine to compensate for stalled or failed Russian offensives elsewhere.

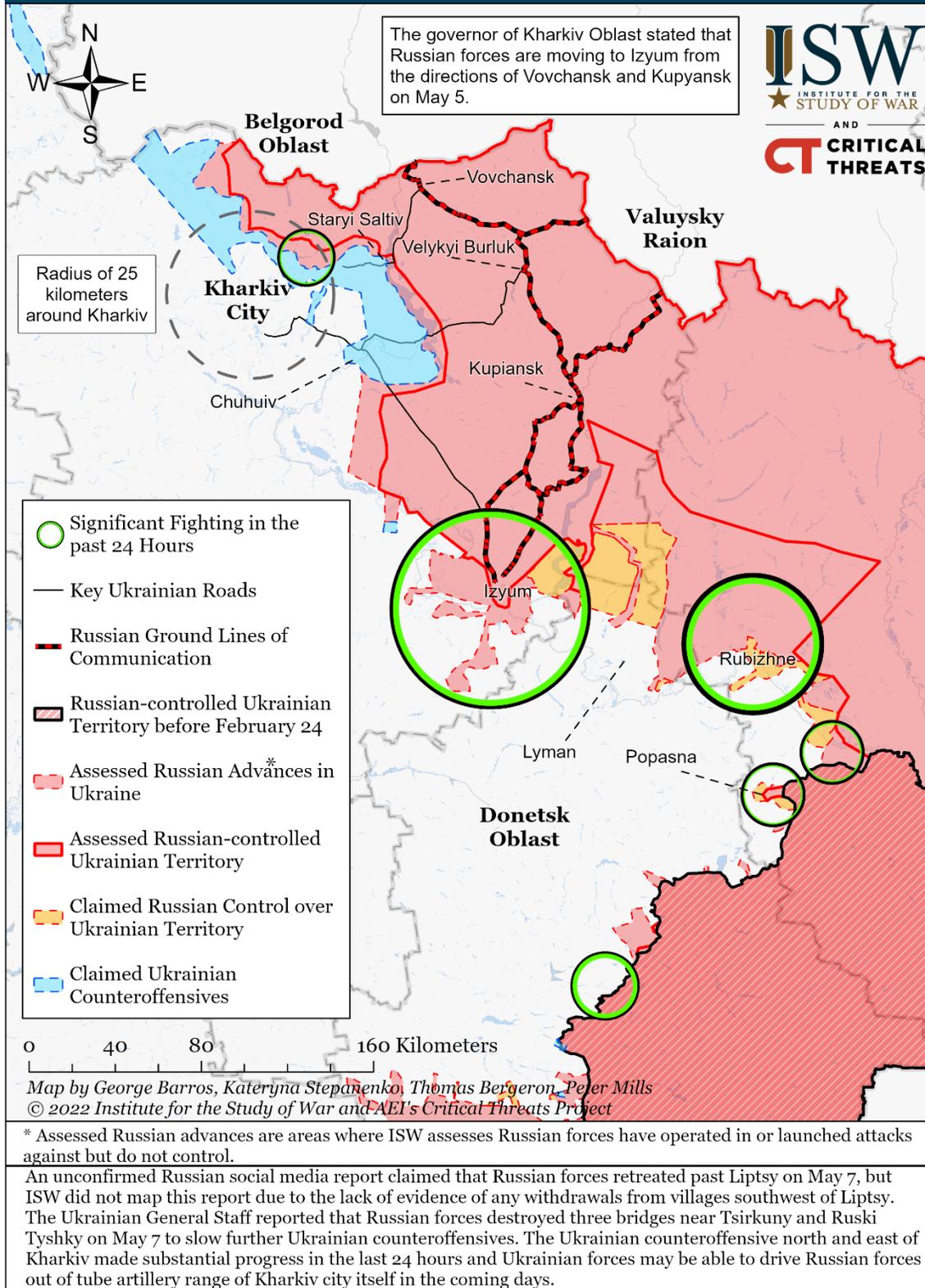
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Supporting Effort #2—Kharkiv City (Russian objective: Retain positions on the outskirts of Kharkiv within artillery range of the city and prevent further Ukrainian counterattacks)

Russian forces destroyed several bridges to slow Ukrainian forces and may be conducting a limited withdrawal northeast of Kharkiv city in the face of the successful Ukrainian counteroffensive on May 7. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces recaptured Tsyркuny, 22km northeast of the Kharkiv city center.¹⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff additionally reported that Russian forces destroyed three road bridges in Tsyркuny and Rusky Tyshky (the next town to the northeast that Ukrainian forces are advancing toward) to slow Ukrainian forces.¹⁶ ISW cannot independently confirm Russian forces destroyed these bridges and withdrew, though Russian forces destroyed several bridges during the withdrawal from Chernihiv Oblast and are likely doing so around Kharkiv.

Ukrainian forces are making significant progress and will likely advance to the Russian border in the coming days, though some reports of advances 40km north of Kharkiv appear overstated. The Russian Ministry of Defense abnormally acknowledged that Ukrainian forces recaptured Tsyркuny (as Russian military sources rarely acknowledge any setbacks), but falsely claimed that Ukrainian forces used civilians as human shields to advance to the outskirts of Borshchva—possibly in an attempt to justify Russian setbacks. Pro-Russian Telegram channels additionally reported that Russian forces withdrew to Lyptsi, past Borshchva and 40km from central Kharkiv, but ISW cannot confirm that Ukrainian forces have advanced this far and the Kharkiv Military Administration reported that Russian forces still control Ruski Tyshky, on the road to Lyptsi.¹⁷ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 7 that Russian forces are deploying additional reserves to support the elements of the 20th Combined Arms Army and 1st Guards Tank Army fighting around Kharkiv.¹⁸ ISW previously forecasted that the Ukrainian counteroffensive would force Russian forces to redirect units intended for the Izyum axis to defend the outskirts of Kharkiv. Given the current rate of Ukrainian advances, Russian forces may not be able to prevent Ukrainian forces from reaching the Russian border, even with additional Russian reinforcements.

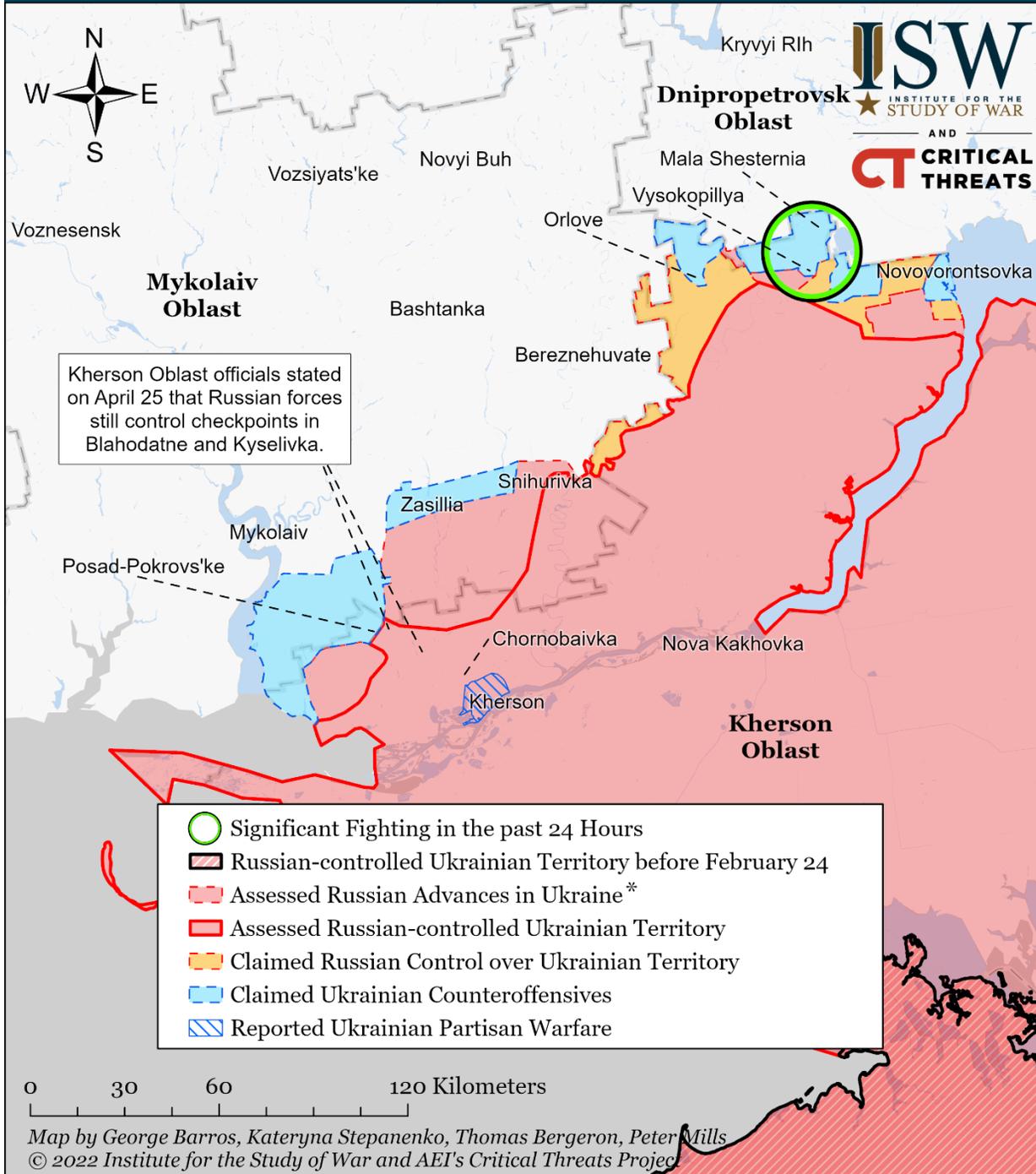
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of May 7, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

By all indications, Russian forces will announce the creation of a Kherson People’s Republic or possibly directly forcibly annex Kherson Oblast in the coming weeks and possibly as soon as May 9, though the Kremlin is not bound to this date. The Ukrainian General Staff reported Russian forces are taking a number of unspecified measures to strengthen the Russian occupation regime in Kherson and increased the number of checkpoints and foot patrols throughout the city.¹⁹ DNR leader Denis Pushilin arrived in Kherson on May 6.²⁰ ISW cannot confirm what he did during his visit, though it likely concerned establishing some form of Russian proxy republic. Ukrainian Ombudsperson Lyudmyla Denisova reported on May 7 that the Kremlin plans to grant Kherson residents possible Russian citizenship, as the Kremlin has previously done in the DNR and LNR.²¹ Finally, Occupation Deputy Head of the Kherson Region Stremousov reportedly stated that occupied Kherson intends to “live as part of the Russian Federation and will resemble something close to Crimea in terms of the pace of development” and that the region will “strive to become a subject of Russia,” echoing longstanding rhetoric by the DNR and LNR on desired ties with Russia.²² As ISW has previously assessed, the Kremlin will likely form illegal proxy republics or directly annex occupied areas of southern and eastern Ukraine to cement its occupation administration and attempt to permanently strip these territories from Ukraine.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of May 7, 2022, 3:00 PM ET

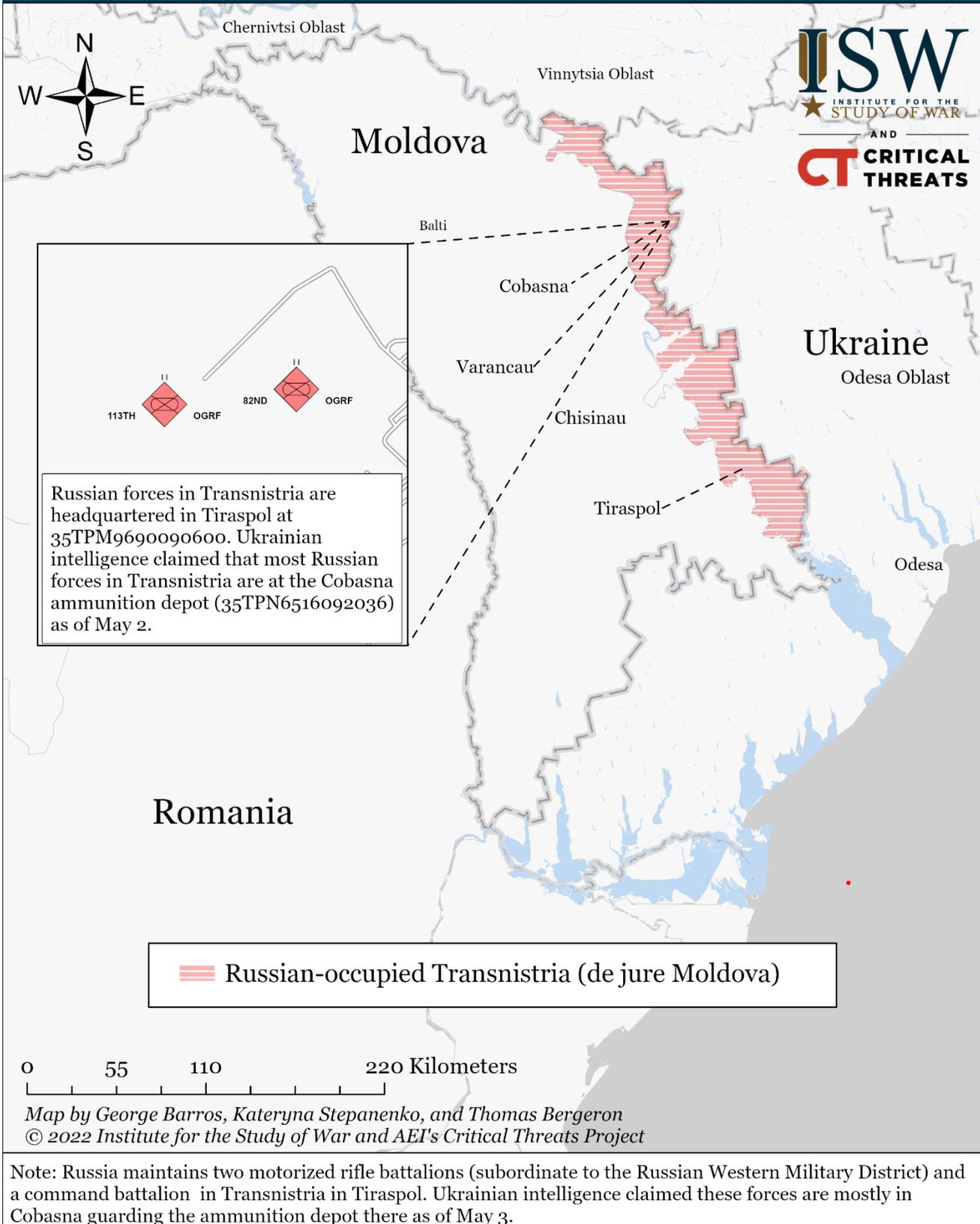


* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: Ukraine's General Staff reported on May 5 that Ukrainian forces regained control over several unspecified settlements on the border of Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts. Ukrainian forces also announced regaining control over four unspecified villages along the Kherson-Mykolaiv border on May 3. This is insufficient evidence and information to update our maps at this time. ISW will update our map once open sources name the liberated settlements.

Russian forces continued to target Odesa with cruise missile strikes and conduct false-flag attacks in Transnistria over the past several days. Ukraine's Operational Command South reported that Russian aircraft launched four cruise missiles at Odesa Oblast on May 7 and two missiles late on May 6 to exert "psychological pressure" on civilians.²³ Ukrainian sources reported that Russian special services continued to conduct false-flag attacks at key sites in Transnistria in an attempt to frame Ukrainian forces, and Ukraine's Operational Command South stated the Moldovan-Ukrainian border is well protected by Ukrainian counter-sabotage groups.²⁴ Transnistrian sources falsely claimed that Ukrainian drones dropped four explosives on an airfield in Varancau, on the border of Transnistria and Ukraine, the night of May 6-7.²⁵

Moldova Situational Map as of May 8, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces made any confirmed advances on the Southern Axis in the last 24 hours, though sporadic fighting continued along the line of contact. Ukrainian sources reported continued fighting toward Mykolaiv, Kryvyi Rih, and Zaporizhia without any significant changes, as well as continued Russian shelling.²⁶

Supporting Effort #4—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine: (Russian objective: Withdraw combat power in good order for redeployment to eastern Ukraine)

There were no significant events on this axis in the past 24 hours.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces will likely continue to merge offensive efforts southward of Izyum with westward advances from Donetsk in order to encircle Ukrainian troops in southern Kharkiv Oblast and Western Donetsk.
- Russia may change the status of the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics, possibly by merging them into a single “Donbas Republic” and/or by annexing them directly to Russia.
- Russian forces have apparently decided to seize the Azovstal plant through ground assault and will likely continue operations accordingly.
- Ukrainian counteroffensives around Kharkiv City may unhinge Russian positions northeast of the city, possibly forcing the Russians to choose between reinforcing those positions or abandoning them if the Ukrainians continue to press their counterattack.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311567034489715>;

https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1522837066647810053; <https://t.me/operativnoZSU/22891> <https://t.me/mysiagin/8417>;
https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1522680071416426502.

² <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1522899560644939776>;

<https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1522898296804712450>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1522597272437067782>;

<https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1522709692656631809>.

³ <https://apps.sentinel-hub.com/eo-browser/?zoom=11&lat=49.24943&lng=37.32365&themeld=DEFAULT->

[THEME&visualizationUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fservices.sentinel-hub.com%2Fogc%2Fwms%2Fbd86bcc0-f318-402b-a145-015f85b9427e&evalscript=Ly9WRVJTSU9OPTMKZnVuY3Rpb24gc2V0dXAoKSB7CiAgcmV0dXJlHsKICAgIGlucHV0OiBBIklwNCIsIklwMyIsIklwMiliSjKjYXRhTWZayJdLAogICAgb3V0cHV0OiB7IGJhbWZzOjE0IHR0KICB9Owp9CgpmW5jdGlviBldmFsdWF0ZVBpeGVsKHNhbXBzZSkgeWogIAogIHJldHVybiBbNSAQIHhXbS55CmDQsIDUgKiBzYW1wbGUuUjAzLCA1Cjogc2FtcGxllklwMiwgc2FtcGxllmRhdGFNYXNrXTsKfQ%3D%3D&datasetId=S2L2A&fromTime=2022-05-06T00%3A00%3A00.000Z&toTime=2022-05-06T23%3A59%3A59.999Z#custom-script](https://apps.sentinel-hub.com/eo-browser/?zoom=11&lat=49.24943&lng=37.32365&themeld=DEFAULT-THEME&visualizationUrl=https%3A%2F%2Fservices.sentinel-hub.com%2Fogc%2Fwms%2Fbd86bcc0-f318-402b-a145-015f85b9427e&evalscript=Ly9WRVJTSU9OPTMKZnVuY3Rpb24gc2V0dXAoKSB7CiAgcmV0dXJlHsKICAgIGlucHV0OiBBIklwNCIsIklwMyIsIklwMiliSjKjYXRhTWZayJdLAogICAgb3V0cHV0OiB7IGJhbWZzOjE0IHR0KICB9Owp9CgpmW5jdGlviBldmFsdWF0ZVBpeGVsKHNhbXBzZSkgeWogIAogIHJldHVybiBbNSAQIHhXbS55CmDQsIDUgKiBzYW1wbGUuUjAzLCA1Cjogc2FtcGxllklwMiwgc2FtcGxllmRhdGFNYXNrXTsKfQ%3D%3D&datasetId=S2L2A&fromTime=2022-05-06T00%3A00%3A00.000Z&toTime=2022-05-06T23%3A59%3A59.999Z#custom-script).

⁴ https://twitter.com/Nrg8000/status/1522861125100240896?s=20&t=4g_2qSkSZWWmqQ64qE3shQ.

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311567034489715>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311123487867403>;

https://twitter.com/HN_Schlottman/status/1522976688665403392; <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2377>; https://t.me/rlz_the_kraken/49758; <https://twitter.com/IntelCrab/status/1522790938392805376>;

⁶ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/2382>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311567034489715>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311123487867403>; https://t.me/pavlokyrylenko_donoda/3323.

⁷ <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1522609916246122496>; https://t.me/rlz_the_kraken/49773;

https://twitter.com/666_mancer/status/1522958314010824706; https://t.me/Oleg_Blokhin/28740;

<https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1522706091720810500>; <https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1522731647359143937>

⁸ https://twitter.com/HN_Schlottman/status/1522671532094468103.

⁹ https://t.me/vereshchuk_iryana/1337.

¹⁰ <https://hromadske.ua/posts/v-azovi-zaperechili-sho-grupa-ukrayinskih-bijciv-vijshla-z-azovstali-z-bilim-praporom-ce-buli-civilni>; <https://twitter.com/DonbassSegodnya/status/1522892724512464901>; <https://t.me/polkazov/4468>.

-
- ¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311567034489715>;
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311123487867403>;
<https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1522706201905180672>;
<https://twitter.com/Militarylandnet/status/1522922357630898177>.
- ¹² <https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/306908448287249>.
- ¹³ <https://t.me/andriyshTime/713>.
- ¹⁴ <https://t.me/andriyshTime/706>.
- ¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311567034489715>.
- ¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311123487867403>.
- ¹⁷ <https://t.me/stranaua/40612>; <https://twitter.com/NikNPf/status/1522869607937282048>; <https://www.dw.com/ru/72-j-den-vojny-rossii-protiv-ukrainy-glavnye-sobytiya/a-61715537>.
- ¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311567034489715>.
- ¹⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311123487867403>.
- ²⁰ <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/152260259772926978>.
- ²¹ <https://hromadske dot ua/posts/okupanti-hochut-zminiti-gerb-hersonshini-i-proponuyut-miscevim-rosijske-gromadyanstvo-ombudsmena>.
- ²² <https://t.me/dimsmirnov175/33163>.
- ²³ <https://www.facebook.com/okPivden/posts/2050465488458027>; https://t.me/Bratchuk_Sergey/11514;
<https://twitter.com/RALee85/status/1522909516790218752>; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=732112537799859>.
- ²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/okPivden/posts/2050480928456483>; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=732112537799859>.
- ²⁵ <https://t.me/stranaua/40679>; <https://t.me/tsvtiraspol/25245>; <https://t.me/tsvtiraspol/25240>; <https://t.me/tsvtiraspol/25238>; <https://t.me/krepostpmr/33892>.
- ²⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311123487867403>;
<https://www.facebook.com/okPivden/posts/2050480928456483>; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=732112537799859>;
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=732112537799859>; https://t.me/OP_UA/6490;
https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=362760482552454&id=100064555155257;
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311567034489715>;
<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/311123487867403>; <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=732112537799859>.