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May 21, 2025, 8:30 pm ET

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45 pm ET on May 21. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the May 22 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin likely orchestrated a meeting with Kursk Oblast officials on May 20 to set conditions to justify the renewal of Russian plans to seize Sumy City and illegally annex Sumy Oblast. Putin met with municipal leaders in Kursk Oblast on May 20, during which the head of Glushkovsky Raion, Pavel Zolotarev, asked Putin to create a buffer zone in Sumy Oblast.[1] Putin asked how many kilometers deep this buffer zone should be, and Zolotarev claimed that Russia should seize "at least Sumy (City)" and implied that Russia should be "bigger." [2] Acting Kursk Oblast Governor Alexander Khinshtein later responded to the interaction on his Telegram channel, claiming that his grandfather was from Sumy Oblast, so "this land is not foreign to [him]." [3] Sumy City is roughly 25 kilometers from the international border, and a buffer zone deep enough to include Sumy City would prevent Ukrainian forces from conducting tube artillery and tactical drone strikes against Russian territory. Western and Ukrainian sources reported that the Russian delegation at the May 16 Ukrainian-Russian talks in Istanbul threatened to seize Sumy Oblast in order to create a "security zone." [4] ISW continues to assess that Russia has territorial aims beyond the oblasts that Russia has already illegally occupied or annexed and that Putin may intend to leverage further advances in Sumy Oblast to demand that Ukraine cede part of Sumy Oblast to Russia during future peace negotiations. [5]

The Kremlin likely arranged the interaction at the May 20 meeting in order to frame Putin as an effective and engaged wartime leader by responding to Russian requests to further advance in Sumy Oblast and suggesting that Russia lay claim to more territory within Ukraine. Putin's visit to Kursk Oblast on May 20 for the first time since Russia claimed military victory in the oblast on April 26. [6] ISW has observed reports that Ukrainian forces maintain limited positions in Kursk Oblast as fighting continues, despite official Kremlin claims that Russian forces pushed Ukrainian forces out of the oblast entirely. [7] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on May 21 that Ukrainian forces continue active combat operations in Kursk Oblast. [8] Putin also met with Acting Kursk Oblast Governor Alexander Khinshtein and agreed to continue providing federal funding for local residents and to increase demining operations. [9] Putin's meeting with Khinshtein is part of the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to portray Putin as an effective and caring wartime leader and to downplay Russian failures in the Ukraine theater. [10]

Russian forces are highly unlikely to be able to seize Sumy City in the near- to medium-term given Russia's demonstrated inability to rapidly seize even much smaller

settlements in Ukraine in the past three years. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on May 19 that elements of the Russian 18th Motorized Rifle Division (11th Army Corps [AC], Leningrad Military District [LMD]) and 72nd Motorized Rifle Division (44th AC, LMD) are conducting most of the assaults in the Sumy direction and that elements of the 83rd Separate Airborne (VDV) Brigade are likely also operating in the Sumy direction.[11] Mashovets stated that up to four or five motorized rifle and rifle regiments of the Russian mobilization reserve are also operating in the Sumy direction.[12] These limited elements reportedly operating in the Sumy direction are insufficient to seize a city as large as Sumy City (pre-war population of 256,000), and Russian forces have not demonstrated the capability to seize large cities since the first months of the war. Russian forces have not seized a Ukrainian city with a pre-war population greater than 100,000 since capturing Lysychansk, Luhansk Oblast in July 2022, but the seizure of Lysychansk was the result of a slow grinding effort that caused Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine to culminate in summer 2022, as opposed to a rapid and effective maneuver operation.[13] Russian forces have since struggled to seize much smaller settlements in subsequent campaigns despite using larger numbers of forces, especially in eastern and northern Ukraine.[14] Ukrainian officials have also previously expressed doubt that Russian forces would be able to conduct an effective offensive operation to seize Sumy City.[15]

Russia continues to promote the false narrative accusing Ukrainian forces of "neo-Nazism" as part of dual Kremlin efforts to justify continued Russian offensive operations in Ukraine despite ongoing peace talks, and to prepare the Russian population for a Russian rejection of any future peace agreement. Putin also used the visit to Kursk Oblast to claim that Ukrainian forces intentionally damaged monuments to the Second World War during the Kursk Oblast incursion.[16] Putin claimed that Ukrainian forces' alleged destruction of these monuments "gives [Russia] every reason to say that these are people with neo-Nazi ideology." The Kremlin has long promoted the narrative that Ukraine harbors neo-Nazi ideology in an effort to justify its military aggression against Ukraine and its calls for regime change in Kyiv. Kremlin officials, including Putin, have recently claimed that the Ukrainian government does not fully control the Ukrainian military and lacks control over alleged "neo-Nazi groups" as part of wider Kremlin efforts to undermine the Ukrainian government's legitimacy and present Ukraine as an illegitimate negotiating partner.[17] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin is using its narratives about the Ukrainian government's illegitimacy to set conditions to renege on any future Ukrainian-Russian agreements, and the Kremlin may intensify this informational campaign to socialize the Russian domestic audience for such a future rejection.[18] The fact that Putin is perpetuating these narratives to justify further offensive operations in Ukraine highlights the dissonance between Putin's posturing to Western audiences versus his posturing to a domestic audience.

Russia continues to reject American proposals to establish a ceasefire in Ukraine before starting negotiations to end the war. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated on May 20 that the United States is waiting for Russia to present a document outlining the "terms that [Russia] would require in order to reach a ceasefire that would then allow for broader negotiations." [19] Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov directly rejected on May 21 the idea that Russia and Ukraine should come to "a truce and then we'll see," apparently disparaging the United States and its partners' attempts to facilitate negotiations.[20] Lavrov claimed that Russia does not want to repeat the Istanbul 2022 Ukrainian-Russian talks. Lavrov's May 21 statement is an explicit rejection of the US proposal for the establishment of a ceasefire first and then peace talks.[21] ISW has long assessed that Russia attempted

to use the Istanbul 2022 talks to frame Russia's demands for Ukraine's full surrender as legitimate and reasonable.[22] Lavrov's statements indicate that Russia continues to conflate the ceasefire and peace settlement processes, as Russia remains committed to making incremental gains on the battlefield indefinitely.

Russian officials are setting conditions to refuse Western involvement in peace negotiations to end Russia's war in Ukraine and for Russia to deny the independence and sovereignty of other former Soviet states. Russian Presidential Advisor Anton Kobayakov claimed on May 21 that the Soviet Union's founding body, the Congress of People's Deputies, was not involved in dissolving the Soviet Union, so the Soviet Union still legally exists and the war in Ukraine is therefore an "internal process." [23] Kobayakov further claimed that the Supreme Soviets of the Union Republics did not have the legal authority to ratify the December 1991 Belovezha Accords, the internationally recognized document in which the Soviet republics of Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus agreed to dissolve the Soviet Union.[24] The parliament of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic elected Boris Yeltsin president of the Russian republic in 1990, and it is in this capacity that he legally signed the Belovezha Accords.[25] Article 72 of the 1977 Constitution of the Soviet Union, however, notably already gave each republic the right to freely secede from the USSR.[26] The Soviet republics formalized the dissolution of the Soviet Union with Declaration No. 142-N in December 1991.[27] Russia has long recognized the independence of and established diplomatic relations with the former Soviet republics.[28] Russia has since entered into a number of treaties with Ukraine, explicitly acknowledging Ukraine's legitimacy.[29] Russia has also long claimed the right to protect its "compatriots abroad" in former Soviet states and created simplified pathways for citizens of former Soviet states to obtain Russian passports – implicit acknowledgments of these states' independence from Russia.[30]

Kobayakov's claims are likely part of efforts to set conditions for the Kremlin to present its full-scale invasion of Ukraine as an "internal Russian affair" in which foreign states should not be involved, including during peace negotiations to end the war. Kobayakov's statements notably also further set conditions for Russia to deny the legitimacy of all the former Soviet republics and to claim the right to violate the territorial integrity of other former Soviet countries beyond Ukraine. The Kremlin has long claimed that Russia is the legitimate successor state to both the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire, and ISW continues to assess that Russia seeks to reconstitute the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire.[31]

Russian security services continue to conduct hybrid operations against the United States and its allies in preparation for a larger future war with NATO. The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), along with the intelligence services of Germany, Czechia, Poland, Australia, Canada, Denmark, Estonia, France, and the Netherlands, issued a cybersecurity advisory on May 21 warning that a Russian state-sponsored cyber campaign has been targeting Western logistics and technology companies for over two years.[32] The report stated that the 85th Main Special Service Center (Unit 26165) of the Russian General Staff's Main Directorate (GRU) has targeted the defense, transportation, and IT service verticals of both government and commercial entities within NATO member states, Romania, Moldova, and Ukraine. Unit 26165 actors reportedly exploited systemic vulnerabilities and leveraged spearfishing, brute guessing, and impersonation campaigns to access information on Western aid shipments to Ukraine, including vessel numbers, routes, and cargo

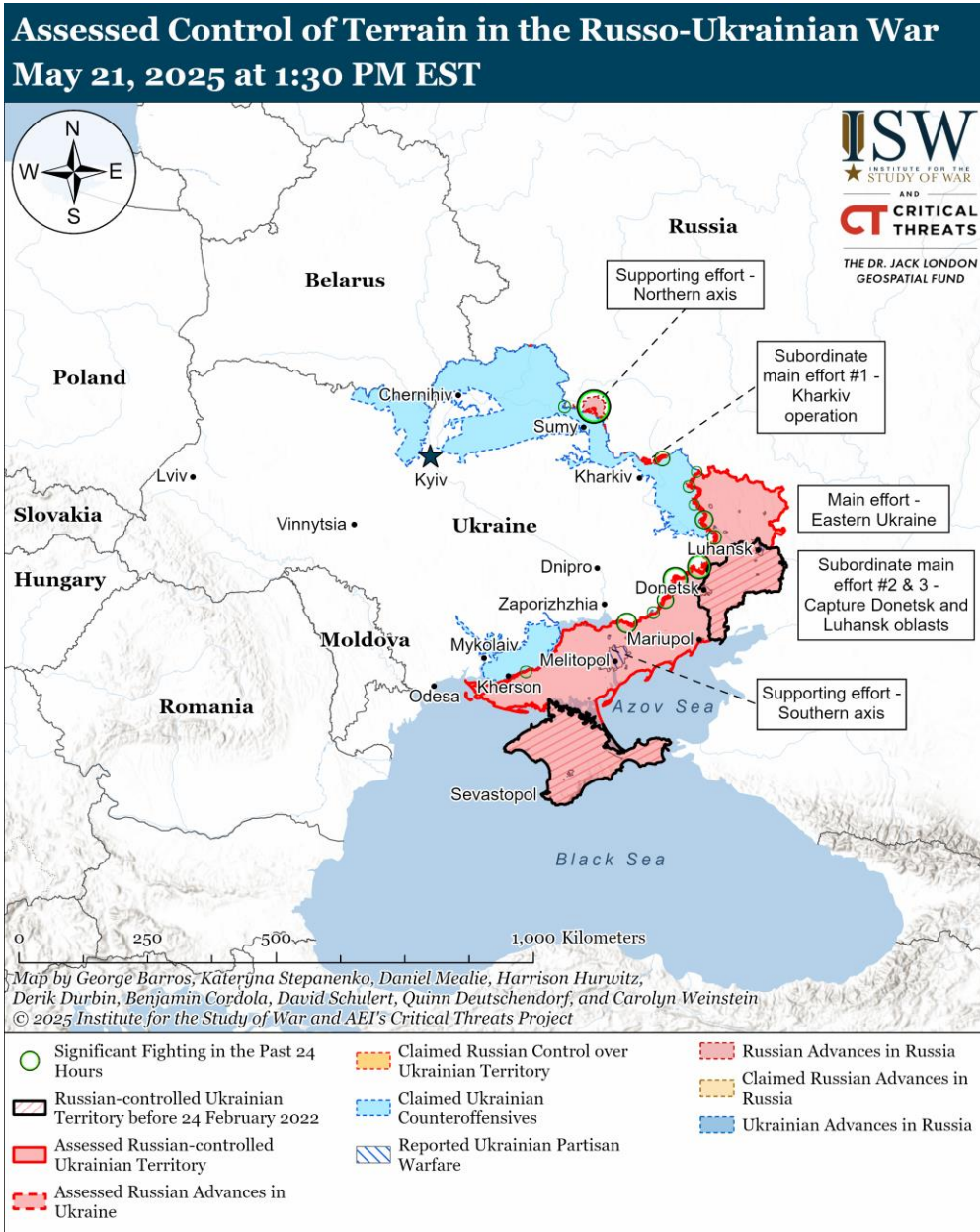
contents. The actors also likely gained remote access to private cameras near key logistics hubs and through public sources, such as traffic cameras, to track the movement of materials into Ukraine. IP camera attacks are largely targeted at cameras within Ukraine, Romania, Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia.

The recent establishment of the first formal motorcycle unit within the Ukrainian military demonstrates the rapid technical adaptation cycle that has become typical in Ukraine and that will become a key characteristic of future wars. Ukraine's 425th "Skala" Separate Assault Regiment reported on May 20 that the Ukrainian military command formed Ukraine's first assault motorcycle company within the regiment and tasked the company with conducting adaptable assault operations and quickly breaking through Russian positions.[33] Ukraine is likely developing its own motorcycle units in response to the recent Russian formalization of its use of motorcycles — a tactic Russian forces have increasingly used on the battlefield since late 2024.[34] Russian forces have grown increasingly reliant on light vehicles such as motorcycles, buggies, and all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) due to successful Ukrainian drone strikes that have damaged and destroyed Russian armored vehicles and exacerbated Russia's vehicle shortages.[35] Russian forces appear to be undergoing a transition period and moving towards regularly conducting assaults exclusively on motorcycles.[36] Ukraine's formation of its motorcycle unit demonstrates the rapid proliferation of technical adaptations throughout the frontline in Ukraine, with major changes implemented across a thousand-kilometer frontline in as few as two to three weeks.[37]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin likely orchestrated a meeting with Kursk Oblast officials on May 20 to set conditions to justify the renewal of Russian plans to seize Sumy City and illegally annex Sumy Oblast.**
- **Russian forces are highly unlikely to be able to seize Sumy City in the near- to medium-term given Russia's demonstrated inability to rapidly seize even much smaller settlements in Ukraine in the past three years.**
- **Russia continues to promote the false narrative accusing Ukrainian forces of "neo-Nazism" as part of dual Kremlin efforts to justify continued Russian offensive operations in Ukraine despite ongoing peace talks, and to prepare the Russian population for a Russian rejection of any future peace agreement.**
- **Russia continues to reject American proposals to establish a ceasefire in Ukraine before starting negotiations to end the war.**
- **Russian officials are setting conditions to refuse Western involvement in peace negotiations to end Russia's war in Ukraine and for Russia to deny the independence and sovereignty of other former Soviet states.**
- **Russian security services continue to conduct hybrid operations against the United States and its allies in preparation for a larger future war with NATO.**

- The recent establishment of the first formal motorcycle unit within the Ukrainian military demonstrates the rapid technical adaptation cycle that has become typical in Ukraine and that will become a key characteristic of future wars.
- Russian forces recently advanced near Velyka Novosilka.



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 Russian

violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Alleged Ceasefire Violation
- Ukrainian Operations in the Russian Federation
- Russian Supporting Effort – Northern Axis
- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of three subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Push Ukrainian forces back from the international border with Belgorod Oblast and approach to within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #3 – Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas, and possibly advance into Dnipropetrovsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis
- Russian Air, Missile, and Drone Campaign
- Significant Activity in Belarus

Alleged Ceasefire Violations

There are no active ceasefires in Ukraine.

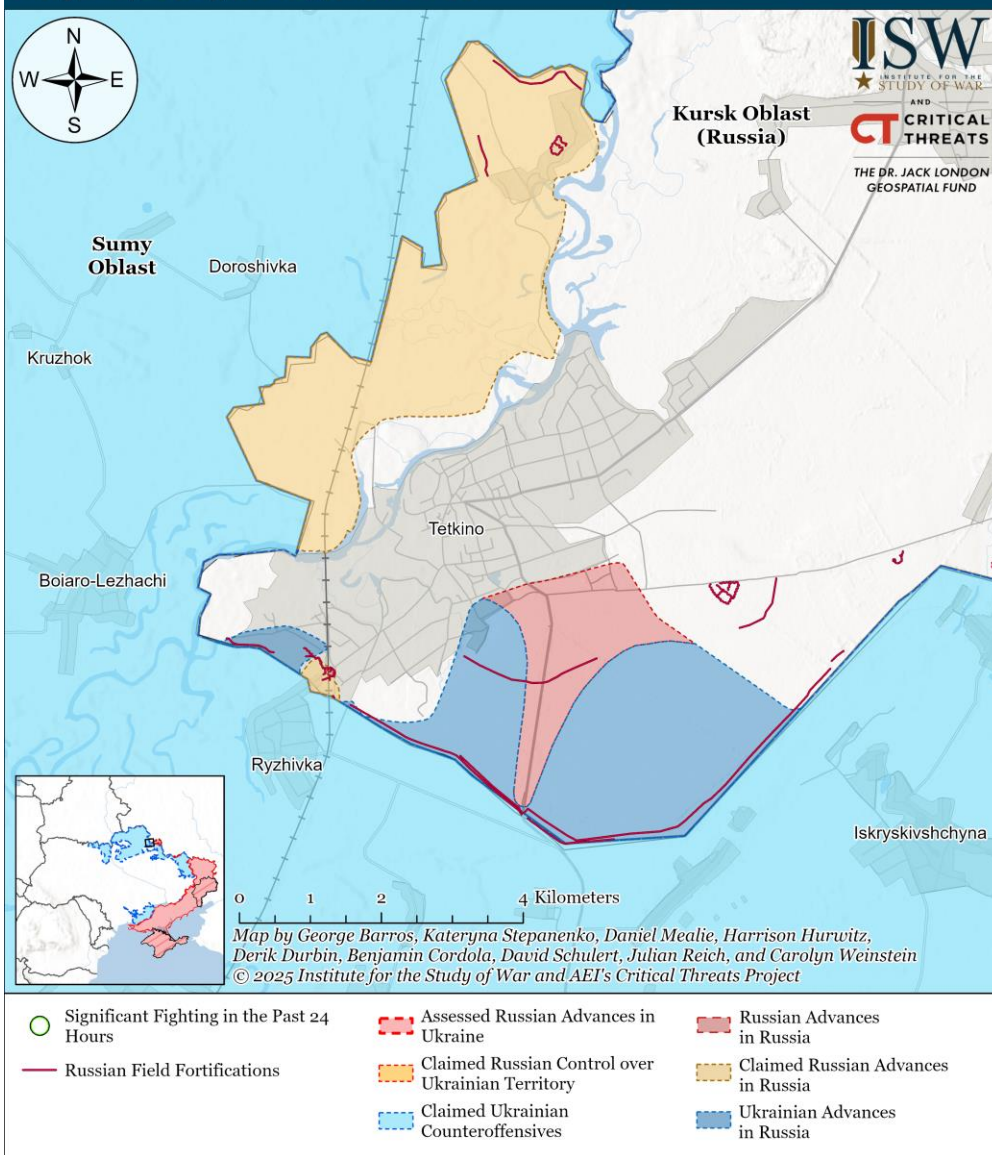
Ukrainian Operations in the Russian Federation

Limited fighting continued in Kursk Oblast on May 21.

Unconfirmed claims: A Russian milblogger claimed on May 20 that Russian forces consolidated positions in southern Tetkino and pushed Ukrainian forces across the international border.[38]

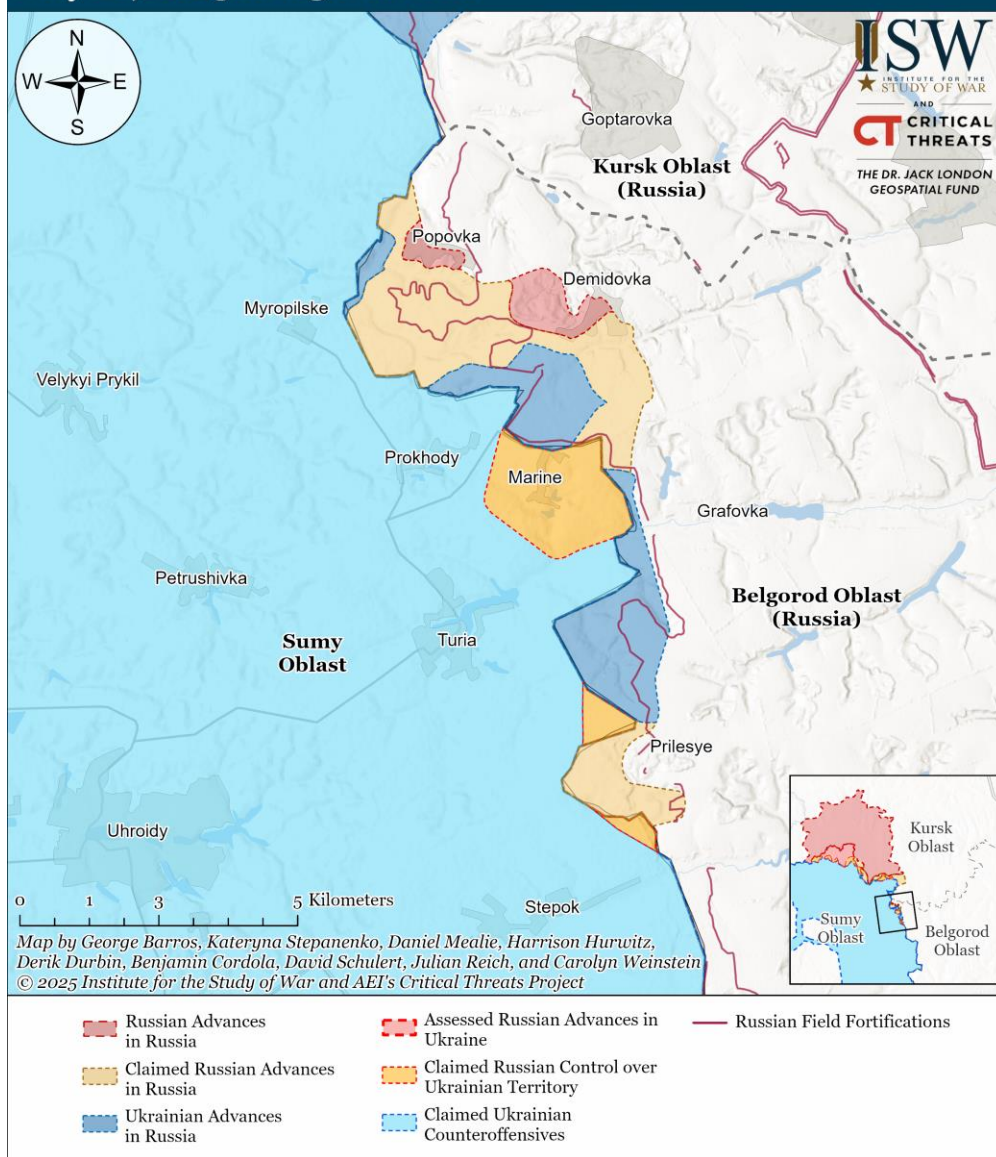
Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked toward Novyi Put (southeast of Tetkino) and Volfino (just northwest of Novyi Put).[39]

Assessed Control of Terrain near Tetkino May 21, 2025 at 1:30 PM EST



Neither Russian nor Ukrainian sources reported ground activity in northwesternmost Belgorod Oblast on May 21.

Assessed Control of Terrain in the Belgorod Direction May 21, 2025 at 1:30 PM EST



Russian sources claimed on May 21 that a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group entered Bryansk Oblast.

Russian milbloggers claimed that locals spotted a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group comprised of seven to eight personnel operating near Subbotovo and Myakishevo (both southwest of Bryansk City and about 76km from the international border) and in Suzemsky Raion (south of Bryansk City) and Trubchevsky Raion (southwest of Bryansk City).[40] ISW has not observed evidence that a group of Ukrainian soldiers entered Bryansk Oblast as of the publication of this report. The milbloggers claimed that the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and Rosgvardia personnel searched for the Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group. One milblogger noted that Russian authorities were not publicly reacting as these reports spread in the Russian information space, and another attributed the Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group's breakthrough to the coverage provided by large forest

areas along the Bryansk Oblast international border.[41] A Bryansk Oblast-based Telegram channel claimed that Russian authorities closed the roads from Bryansk City to Vygonichsky Raion (immediately southwest of Bryansk City) and to Lopush (southwest of Bryansk City), Subbotovo, and Myakishevo.[42] Bryansk Oblast Governor Alexander Bogomaz claimed that the road closures were preventative measures and accused Russian and Ukrainian channels of spreading fake information.[43]

Ukrainian forces struck a semiconductor manufacturing plant in Oryol Oblast overnight on May 20 to 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that the Ukrainian Unmanned Systems Forces and other Ukrainian forces conducted a drone strike against the Bolkhov Semiconductor Devices Plant in Bolkhov, Oryol Oblast, which produces and develops semiconductors, microelectronics, power electronics, diodes and diode assemblies, microcircuits, optoelectronic switches, and servo drives.[44] Ukrainian Center for Countering Disinformation Head Lieutenant Andriy Kovalenko stated that the plant specializes in microcircuits, semiconductors, and control components that Russian forces use in the production of T-72B3 and T-90M tanks, self-propelled howitzers, Iskander and Kh-101 missiles, electronic warfare (EW) systems, and communications equipment.[45] Geolocated footage published on May 21 shows a fire and infrastructure damage at the plant.[46] Oryol Oblast Governor Andrei Klychkov claimed that Ukrainian drones damaged residential buildings and an unspecified building at the plant.[47] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces shot down 64 drones over Oryol Oblast between the night of May 20 and the morning of May 21.[48]

Russian Supporting Effort – Northern Axis (Russian objective: Create defensible buffer zones in northern Ukraine along the international border and approach to within tube artillery range of Sumy City)

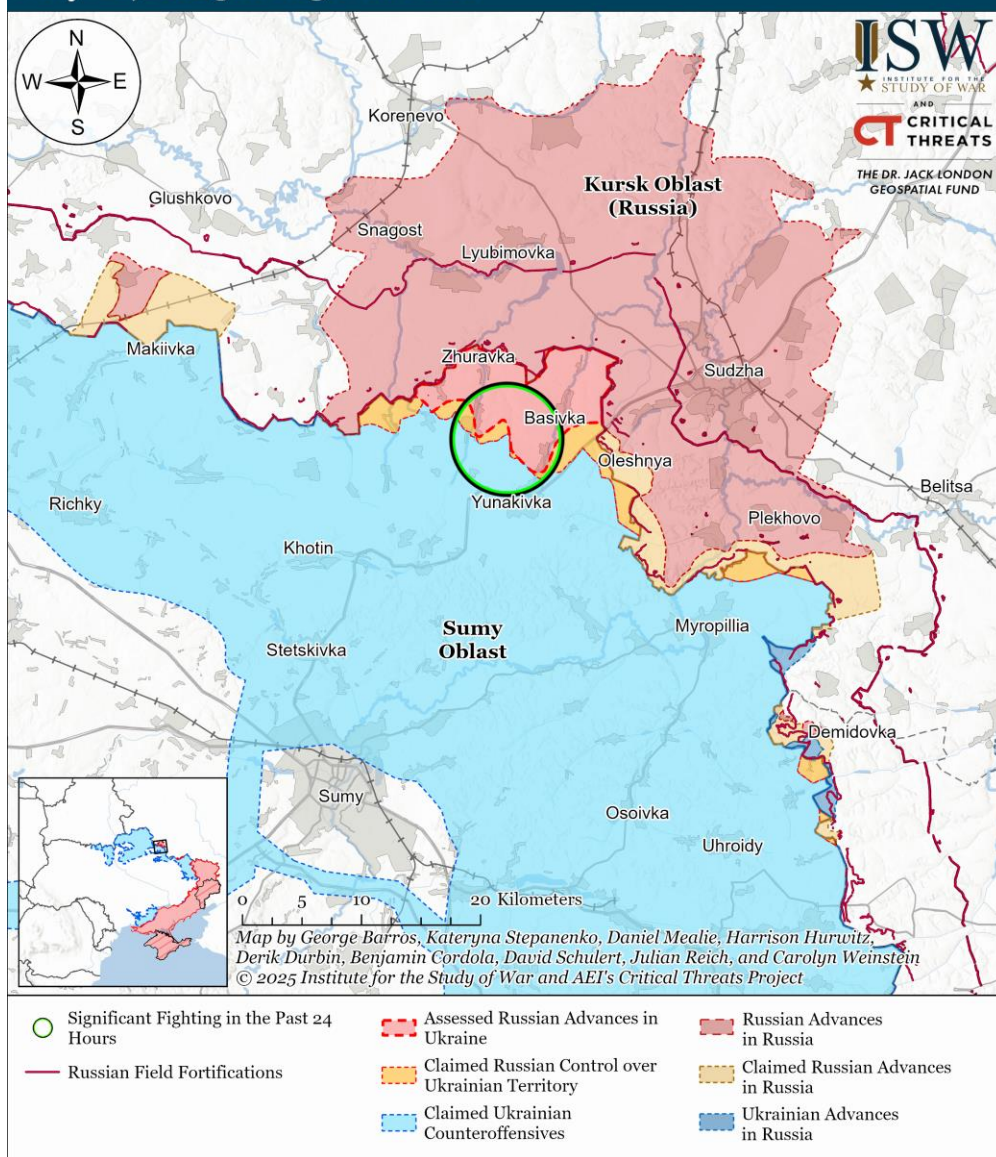
Russian forces continued limited offensive operations in northern Sumy Oblast on May 21 but did not advance.

Russian forces continued ground attacks near Myropilske (east of Sumy City), Bilovody (north of Sumy City), and Yunakivka (northeast of Sumy City).[49]

A Russian milblogger claimed that Loknya (north of Yunakivka) is a contested "gray zone." [50]

Order of Battle: Elements of the Russian 177th Naval Infantry Regiment (Caspian Flotilla) are reportedly operating near Myropilske.[51] Elements of the Russian 83rd Separate Airborne (VDV) Brigade, "Anvar" Spetsnaz detachment (possibly referring to the BARS-25 "Anvar" volunteer detachment), and "Rubikon" Center for Advanced Unmanned Technologies reportedly continue to operate in the Sumy Oblast border area.[52]

Assessed Control of Terrain in the Sumy Direction May 21, 2025 at 1:30 PM EST



Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Kharkiv Oblast (Russian objective: Push Ukrainian forces back from the international border with Belgorod Oblast and approach to within tube artillery range of Kharkiv City)

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Kharkiv direction on May 21 but did not advance.

Russian forces conducted offensive operations northeast of Kharkiv near Vovchansk on May 20 and 21.[53]

A spokesperson for a Ukrainian brigade operating in the Vovchansk direction stated on May 20 that Russian forces increased the number of assaults near Vovchansk, Vovchanski Khutory, and Tykhe (all northeast of Kharkiv City) but that Ukrainian forces maintain fire control of all logistics routes in the area and are preventing Russian forces from building pontoon crossings in Vovchansk over the Vovcha River.[54]

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russians continued offensive operations in the Kupyansk direction on May 21 but did not advance.

Russian forces attacked northeast of Kupyansk near the international border near Kamyanske and toward Stroiivka; north of Kupyansk near Kindrashivka and Doroshivka; and northwest of Kupyansk near Mala Shapivka on May 20 and 21.[55]

A servicemember of a Ukrainian brigade operating in the Kupyansk direction stated on May 20 that Russian forces are accumulating personnel in the brigade's area of responsibility.[56]

Order of Battle: Elements of the Russian 121st Motorized Rifle Regiment (reportedly of the 68th Motorized Rifle Division, 6th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Leningrad Military District [LMD]) are reportedly operating in the Kupyansk direction.[57] Drone operators of the 1431st Motorized Rifle Regiment (11th Army Corps [AC], LMD) are reportedly operating in Kharkiv Oblast, likely in the Kupyansk direction.[58]

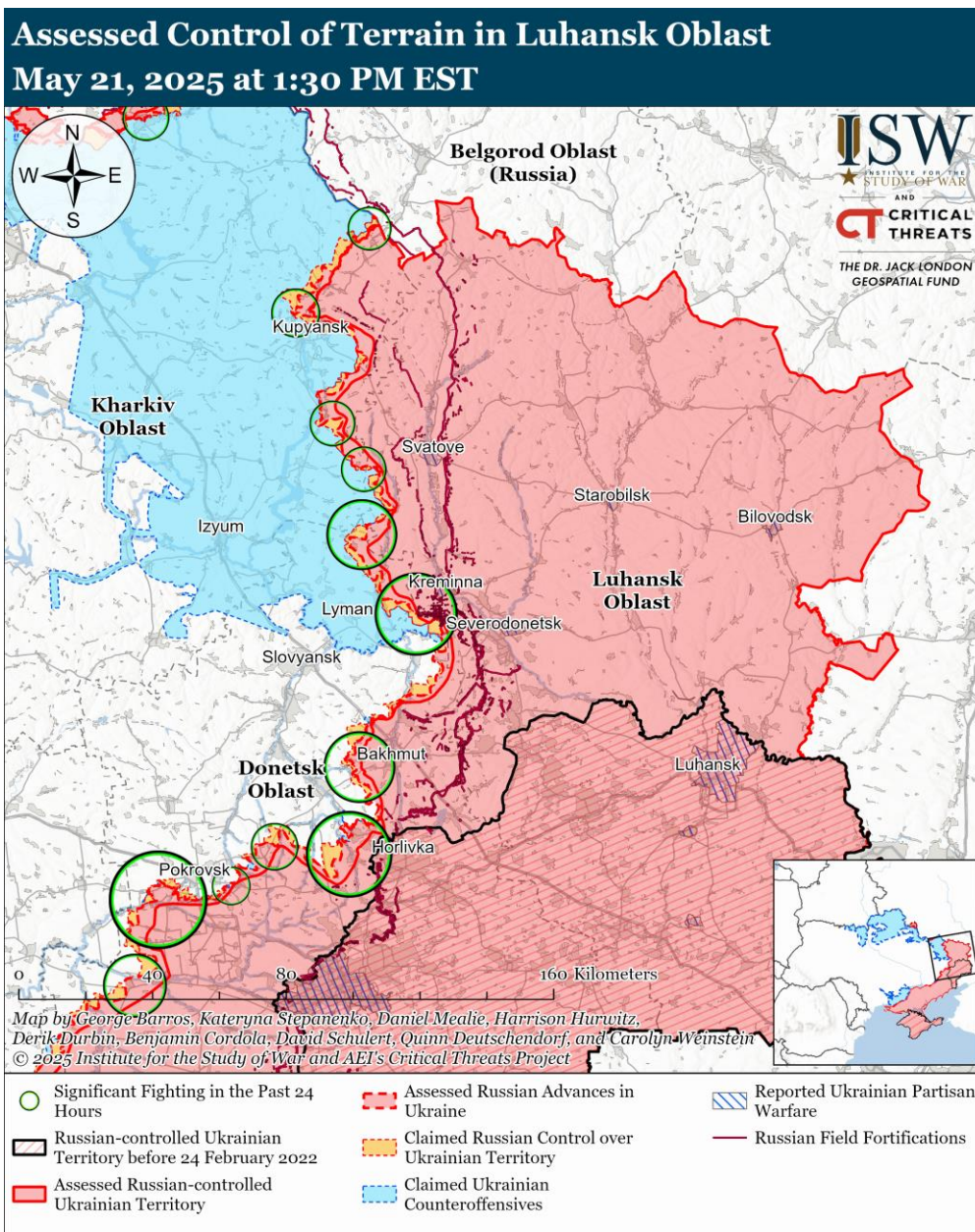
Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Borova direction on May 21 but did not advance.

Russian forces attacked northeast of Borova near Kruhlyakivka and southeast of Borova near Hrekivka and Kopanky and toward Novoserhiivka and Olhivka on May 20 and 21.[59]

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Lyman direction on May 21 but did not advance.

Russian forces conducted ground attacks north of Lyman near Ridkodub, Novyi Mir, and Zelena Dolyna; northeast of Lyman near Yampolivka and Kolodyazi; east of Lyman near Torske; and southeast of Lyman in the Serebrianske forest area on May 20 and 21.[60]

Order of Battle: Elements of the Russian 3rd Motorized Rifle Division (20th CAA, Moscow Military District [MMD]) are reportedly operating in the Lyman direction.[61]



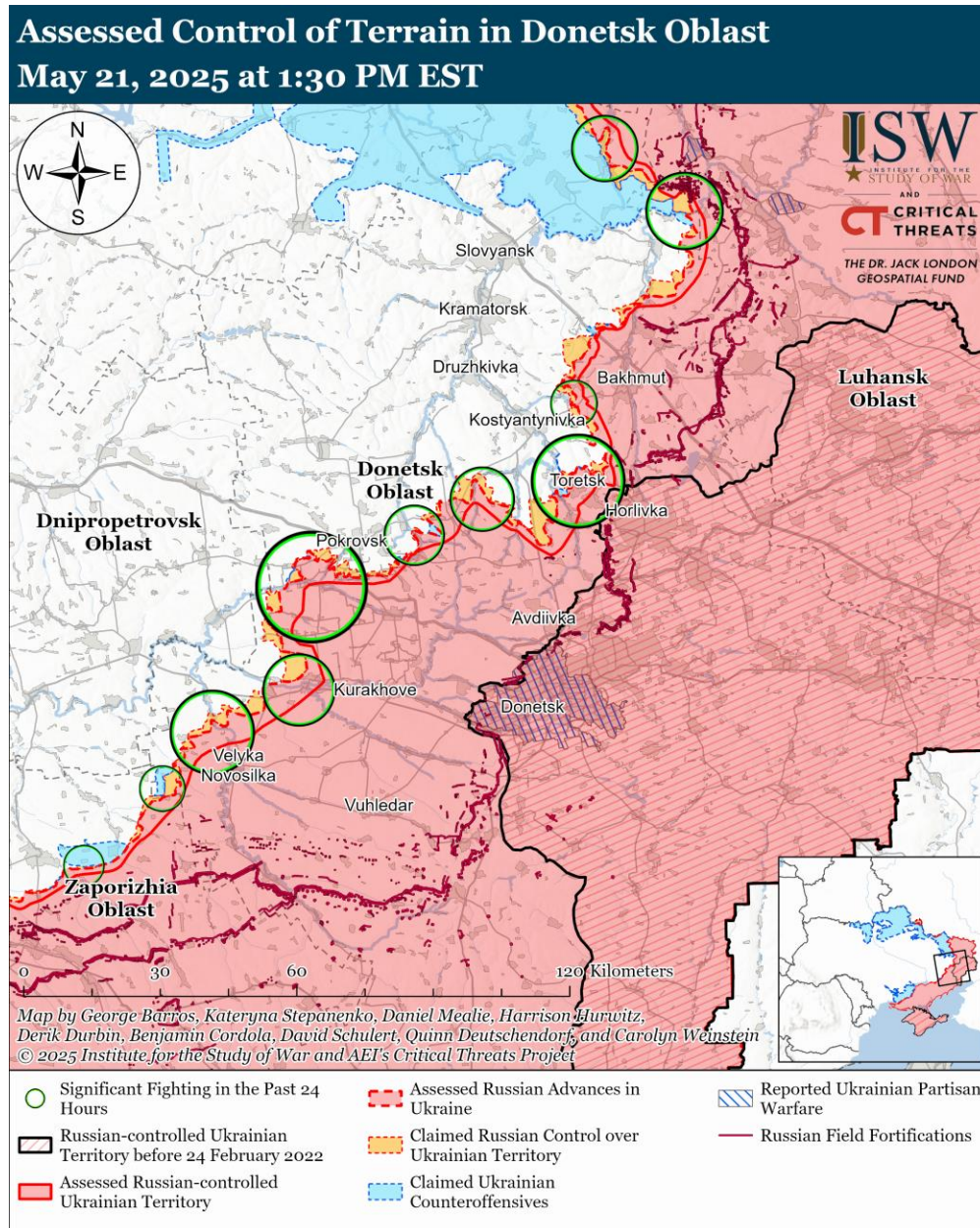
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #3 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas, and possibly advance into Dnipropetrovsk Oblast)

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Siversk direction on May 21 but did not make any confirmed advances.

Unconfirmed claims: Russian sources claimed that Russian forces advanced north of Ivano-Darivka (southeast of Siversk).[62]

Russian forces attacked northeast of Siversk near Bilohorivka on May 20 and 21.[63]

A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Russian command changes in the Siversk direction are slowly yielding results after Russian forces reorganized their tactics.[64] The Russian milblogger noted that Russian forces will need significantly more manpower to seize Siversk, which is heavily fortified.



Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Chasiv Yar direction on May 21 but did not advance.

Russian forces attacked near Chasiv Yar itself; south of Chasiv Yar near Predtechyne and Bila Hora; and southwest of Chasiv Yar near Kurdyumivka on May 20 and 21.[65]

The spokesperson of a Ukrainian brigade operating in the Chasiv Yar direction reported on May 21 that Russian forces are actively using first-person view (FPV) drones equipped with fiber optic cables and

that Russian drone use has increased both in terms of quantity and quality as Russian forces have likely deployed better trained units to the area.[66] The spokesperson stated that the Chasiv Yar and Kostyantynivka (Toretsk) directions are littered with fiber optic cables. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have accumulated manpower for assaults on Shevchenko and Levanevskoho microraiions (southern Chasiv Yar).[67]

Order of Battle: Elements of the Russian 215th Reconnaissance Battalion (98th Airborne [VDV] Division) are reportedly operating near Chasiv Yar.[68]

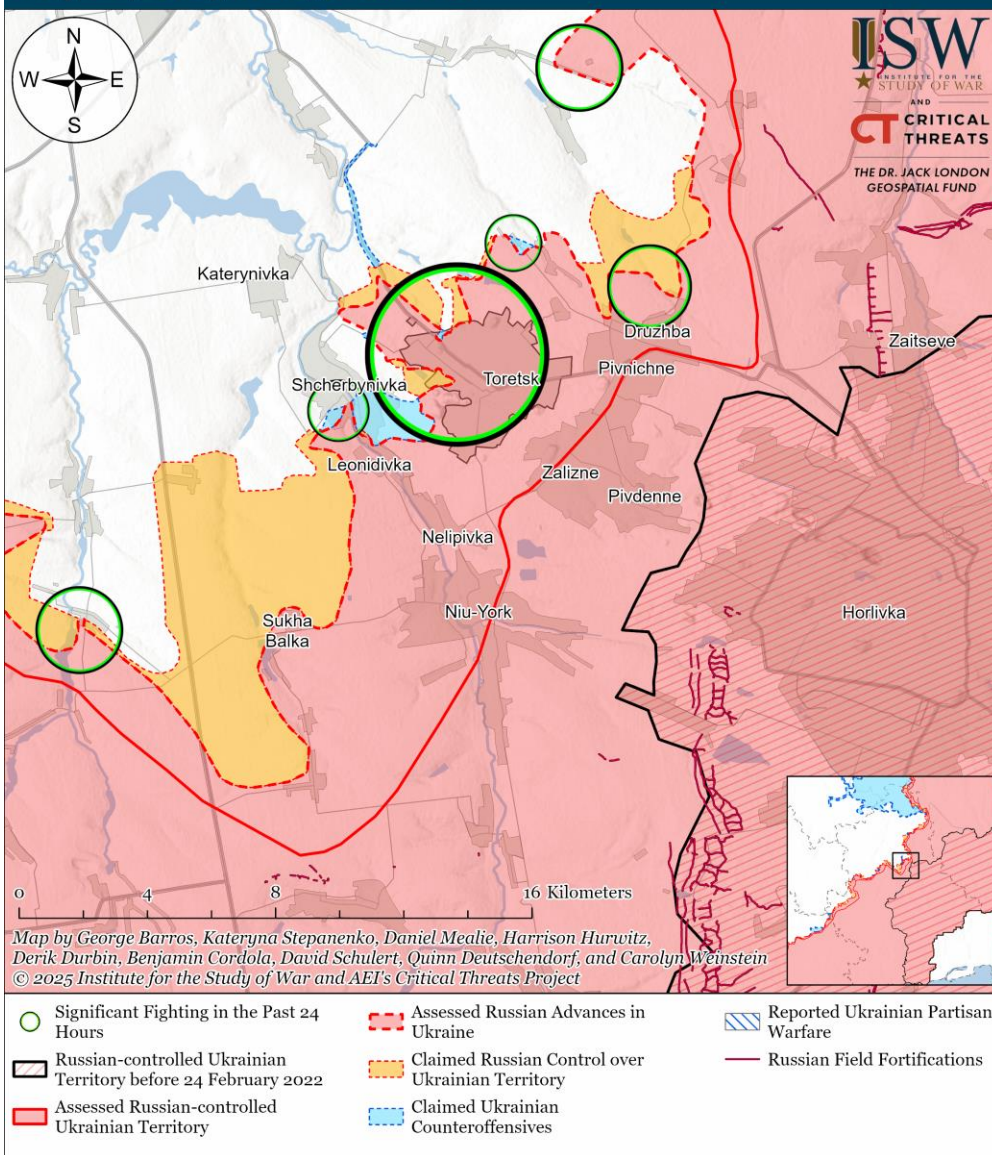
Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Toretsk direction on May 21 but did not make confirmed advances.

Unconfirmed claims: A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced northwest and west of Romanivka (west of Toretsk).[69]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Toretsk itself; east of Toretsk near Druzhba; northeast of Toretsk near Dyliivka; southwest of Toretsk near Novospaske (formerly Petrivka), Stara Mykolaivka, Hnativka, Nova Poltavka, and Oleksandropil, and toward Zorya; and west of Toretsk near Novoolenivka and toward Yablunivka on May 20 and 21.[70]

Order of Battle: Artillery elements of the Russian 20th Motorized Rifle Regiment (possibly a reformed Soviet unit) are reportedly striking Ukrainian positions in the Oleksandro-Kalynove direction (northwest of Toretsk); elements of the 103rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (150th Motorized Rifle Division, 8th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Southern Military District [SMD]) are reportedly operating near Shcherbynivka (west of Toretsk); elements of the 238th Artillery Brigade (8th CAA) are reportedly operating near Shcherbynivka and Dyliivka; and elements of the 242nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (20th Motorized Rifle Division, 8th CAA) are reportedly operating near Oleksandropil.[71] Elements of the 132nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (51st CAA, formerly 1st Donetsk People's Republic Army Corps [DNR AC], SMD) and 33rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (20th Motorized Rifle Division, 8th CAA) are reportedly operating in the Kostyantynivka (Toretsk) direction.[72]

Assessed Control of Terrain in the Toretsk Direction May 21, 2025 at 1:30 PM EST



Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Pokrovsk direction on May 21 but did not make any confirmed advances.

Unconfirmed claims: Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced to western Novoserhiivka (southwest of Pokrovsk) and near Chunyshyne (south of Pokrovsk).[73]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations northeast of Pokrovsk toward Shevchenko Pershe and Malynivka; east of Pokrovsk near Myrolyubivka, Yelyzavetivka, and Pomin; southeast of Pokrovsk near Lysivka; south of Pokrovsk near Dachenske; and southwest of Pokrovsk near Zvirove, Kotlyne, Novoserhiivka, and Udachne on May 20 and 21.[74]

Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces struck a bridge across the Kazennyi Toretsk River east of Shakhove (northeast of Pokrovsk).[75] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the

recent seizure of Novooleksandrivka (northeast of Novopavlivka and southwest of Pokrovsk) will create conditions for Russian forces to advance toward Pokrovsk.[76]

Order of Battle: Drone operators of the 14th Spetsnaz Brigade (Russian General Staff's Main Directorate [GRU]) are reportedly striking Ukrainian forces near Novoukrainka (south of Pokrovsk).[77]

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Novopavlivka direction on May 21 but did not make confirmed advances.

Unconfirmed claims: Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced to central Novomykolaivka (northeast of Novopavlivka), southwest of Kotlyarivka (east of Novopavlivka), west of Horikhove, and south of Bohdanivka (both southeast of Novopavlivka).[78]

Russian forces conducted offensive operations northeast of Novopavlivka toward Muravka and Novomykolaivka; east of Novopavlivka near Kotlyarivka; and southeast of Novopavlivka near Troitske and Horikhove on May 20 and 21.[79] Ukraine's Khortytsia Group of Forces posted footage on May 21 showing Ukrainian forces repelling an at least reinforced platoon-sized Russian mechanized assault in the Novopavlivka direction.[80] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are counterattacking near Troitske.[81] Another milblogger claimed that Ukrainian counterattacks in the Novopavlivka direction in the past week have successfully slowed Russian advances.[82]

The spokesperson of a Ukrainian brigade operating in the Novopavlivka direction stated that Russian forces are attacking without heavy equipment and are instead using dirt bikes, buggies, and sometimes automobiles to transport infantry for assaults.[83] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces maintain positions in northwestern Horikhove.[84]

Russian sources posted footage showing a limited group of Russian personnel from the 90th Tank Division (41st CAA, Central Military District [CMD]) in a pickup truck holding a Russian flag, purportedly at an unspecified part of the border of Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.[85] ISW has recently observed reports that elements of the 90th Tank Division are operating in the Novopavlivka direction, and Russian forces very likely have not established enduring positions at the Dnipropetrovsk Oblast border.[86]

Order of Battle: Elements of the Russian 9th Motorized Rifle Brigade (51st CAA, SMD) are reportedly operating near Novooleksandrivka (northeast of Novopavlivka).[87]

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Kurakhove direction but did not make confirmed advances.

Unconfirmed claims: Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced northeast of Oleksiivka, near Bahatyr (both west of Kurakhove), and east and south of Odradne (southwest of Kurakhove).[88]

Russian forces attacked west of Kurakhove near Kostyantynopil, Andriivka, Oleksiivka, and Bahatyr and southwest of Kurakhove near Odradne on May 20 and 21.[89] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked near Bahatyr and Odradne.[90]

Order of Battle: Drone operators of the Russian 14th Spetsnaz Brigade (Russian General Staff's Main Directorate [GRU]) are reportedly striking Ukrainian positions near Odradne.[91]

Russian forces recently advanced in the Velyka Novosilka direction.

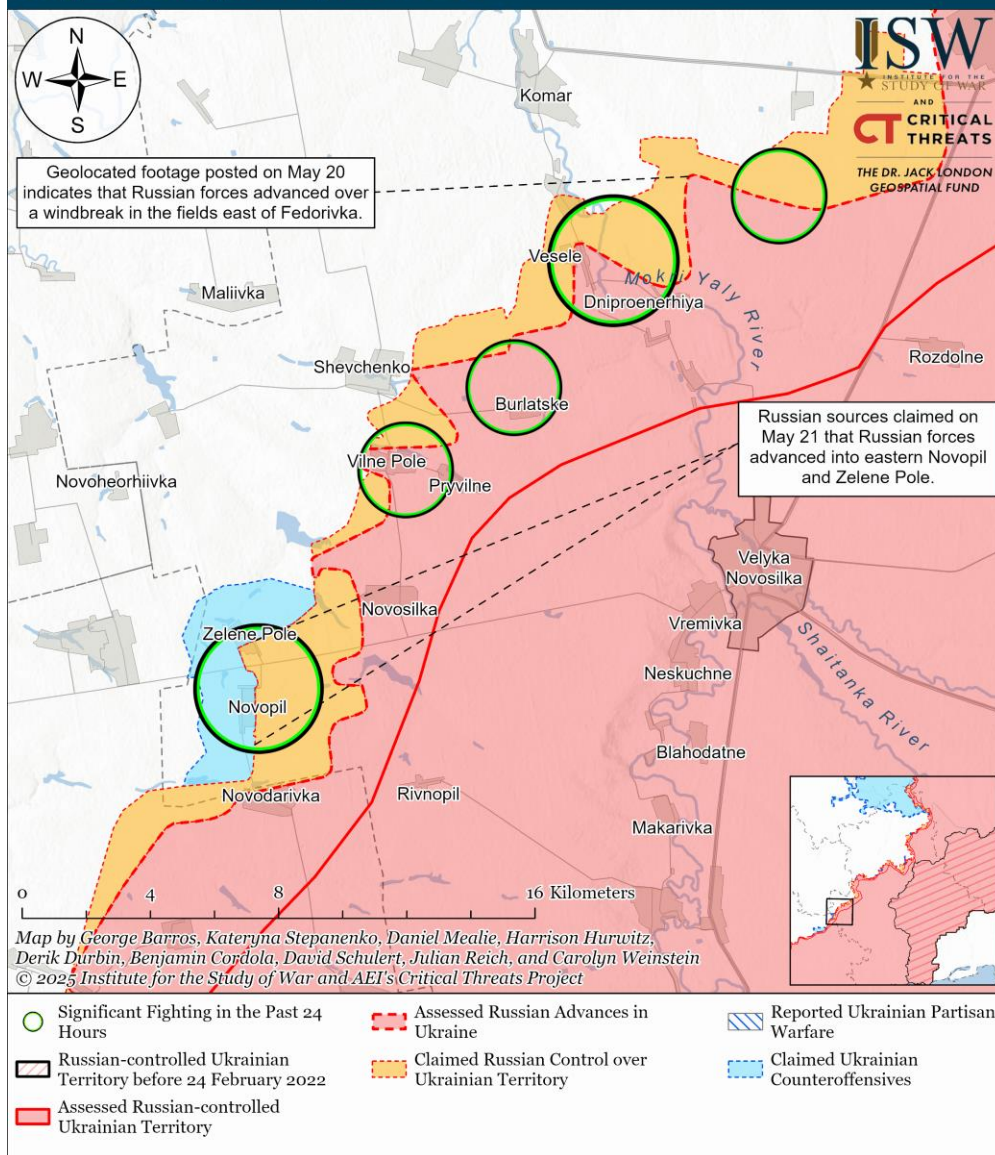
Assessed Russian advances: Geolocated footage published on May 20 indicates that Russian forces recently advanced east of Fedorivka (northwest of Velyka Novosilka).[92]

Unconfirmed claims: Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced southeast of Fedorivka, southwest of Vilne Pole (northwest of Velyka Novosilka), within Zelene Pole (west of Velyka Novosilka), in eastern Novopil, east of Novopil, and northwest of Novodarivka (both southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[93]

Russian forces attacked northwest of Velyka Novosilka near Pryvilne, Burlatske, Vilne Pole, Dniproenerhiya, Shevchenko, and Vesele, and toward Komar, and southwest of Velyka Novosilka near Zelene Pole, Novopil, Novodarivka, and Rivnopil on May 20 and 21.[94] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked near Zelene Pole and Novopil.[95]

Order of Battle: Drone operators of the Russian 14th Spetsnaz Brigade (GRU) are reportedly striking Ukrainian positions near Komar.[96]

Assessed Control of Terrain in the Velyka Novosilka Direction May 21, 2025 at 1:30 PM EST



Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions, secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes, and advance within tube artillery range of Zaporizhzhia City)

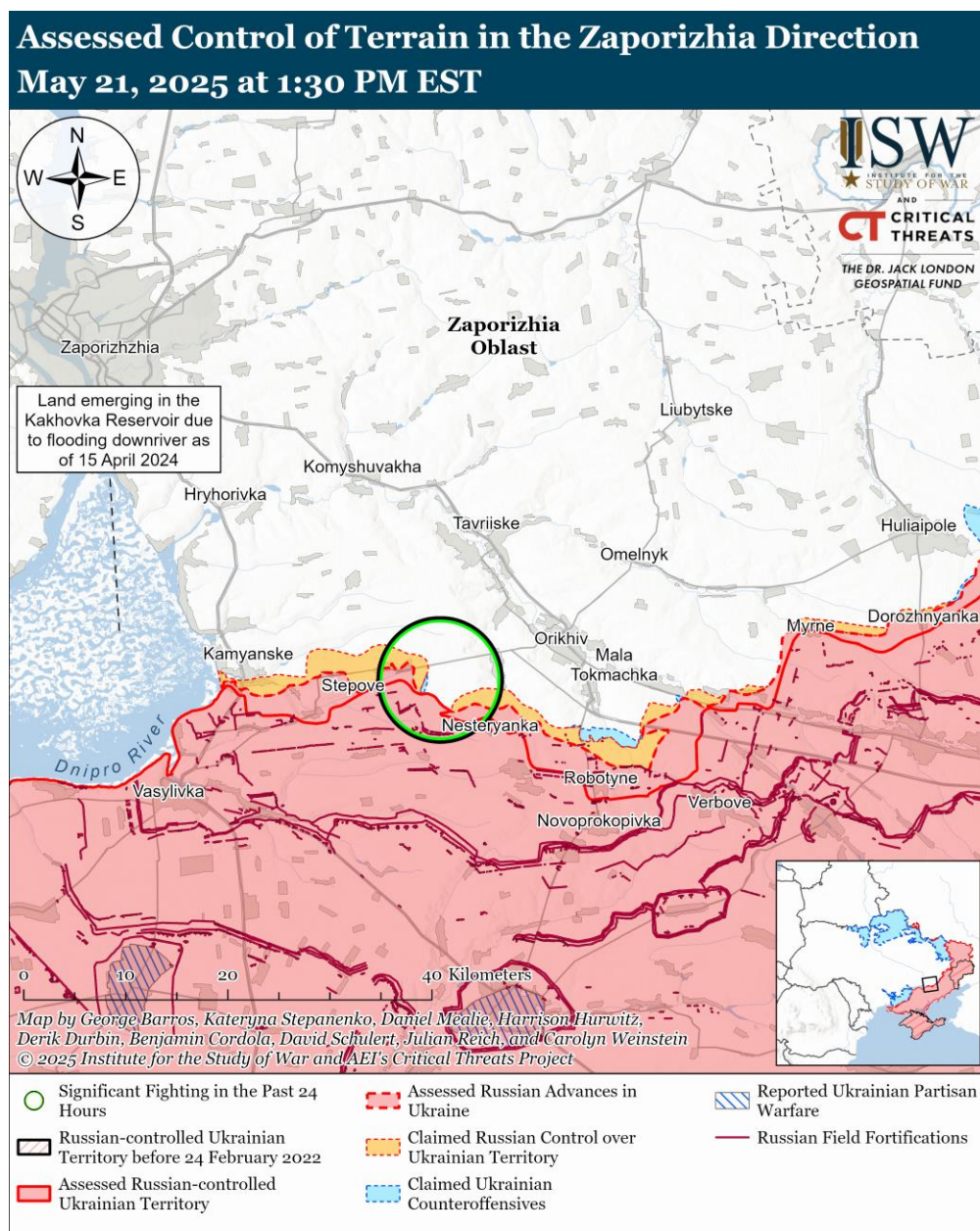
Russian forces conducted offensive operations east of Hulyaipole near Vysoke (formerly Chervone) on May 21 but did not advance.[97]

Order of Battle: Artillery elements of the Russian 38th Motorized Rifle Brigade (35th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Eastern Military District [EMD]) are reportedly operating near Malynivka (east of Hulyaipole).[98]

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Zaporizhzhia direction on May 21 but did not advance.

Russian forces attacked southeast of Orikhiv near Mala Tokmachka; south of Orikhiv near Novodanylivka; and southwest of Orikhiv near Mali Shcherbaky, Shcherbaky, Novoandriivka, Kamyanske, and Stepove on May 20 and 21.[99]

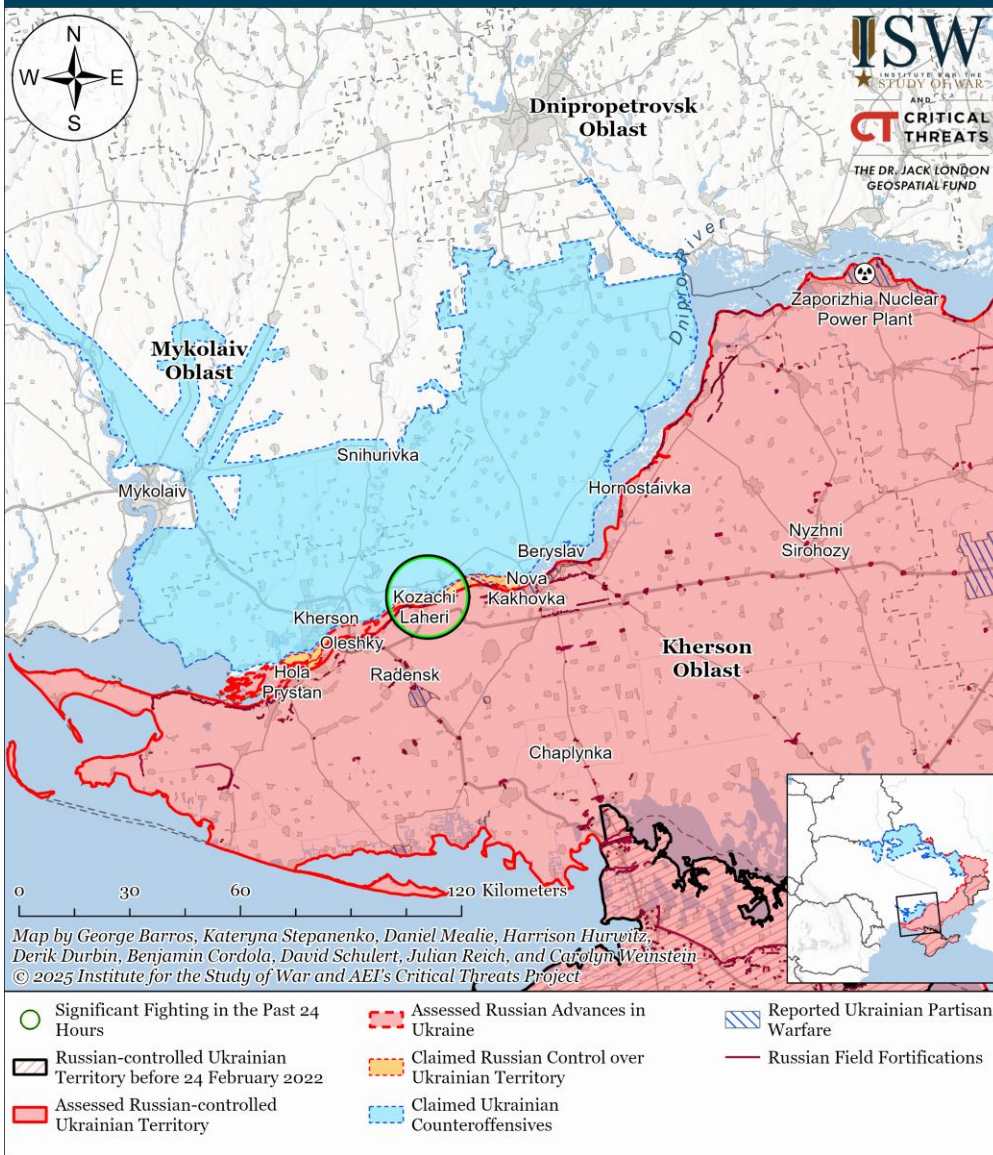
Order of Battle: Elements of the Russian 7th Airborne (VDV) Division are reportedly operating in the Zaporizhia direction.[100]



Russian forces conducted limited offensive operations in the Kherson direction on May 21 but did not advance.[101]

Order of Battle: Elements of the Russian 88th “Hispaniola” Volunteer Brigade (Russian Volunteer Corps) reportedly continue operating in occupied Crimea.[102]

Assessed Control of Terrain in the Kherson Direction May 21, 2025 at 1:30 PM EST



Russian Air, Missile, and Drone Campaign (Russian Objective: Target Ukrainian military and civilian infrastructure in the rear and on the frontline)

Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine overnight on May 20 and 21. The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched 76 Shahed and decoy drones from the directions of Kursk, Oryol, and Bryansk cities.[103] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces downed 63 drones over eastern, northern, and central Ukraine and that 41 drones were "lost." Ukrainian officials reported that Russian drones struck civilian infrastructure objects in Kharkiv and Kyiv oblasts.[104]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed on May 20 that Russian forces conducted an Iskander ballistic missile strike against a Ukrainian training camp near Shostka, Sumy Oblast (northwest of Sumy City).[105]

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

Belarusian authorities continue efforts to integrate Belarusian defense production with the Russian defense industrial base. Belarusian Military Industry Chairperson Dmitry Pantus reported on May 21 that Russia and Belarus both rely on parts and components from the other to fulfill their defense orders.[106] Pantus added that Russia and Belarus are working on the joint production of the "Osvey" twin-engine light multipurpose aircraft, which will reportedly be manufactured 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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