

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

Special Edition: Russian Military Capabilities Assessments

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The Russian military is attempting to generate sufficient combat power to seize and hold the portions of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts that it does not currently control after it completes the seizure of Mariupol. There are good reasons to question the Russian armed forces' ability to do so and their ability to use regenerated combat power effectively despite a reported simplification of the Russian command structure. This update, which we offer on a day without significant military operations on which to report, attempts to explain and unpack some of the complexities involved in making these assessments.

*We discuss below some instances in which American and other officials have presented information in ways that may inadvertently exaggerate Russian combat capability. **We do not in any way mean to suggest that such exaggeration is intentional.** Presenting an accurate picture of a military's combat power is inherently difficult. Doing so from classified assessments in an unclassified environment is especially so. We respect the efforts and integrity of US and allied officials trying to help the general public understand this conflict and offer the comments below in hopes of helping them in that task.*

We assess that the Russian military will struggle to amass a large and combat-capable force of mechanized units to operate in Donbas within the next few months. Russia will likely continue to throw badly damaged and partially reconstituted units piecemeal into offensive operations that make limited gains at great cost.¹ The Russians likely will make gains nevertheless and may either trap or wear down Ukrainian forces enough to secure much of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, but it is at least equally likely that these Russian offensives will culminate before reaching their objectives, as similar Russian operations have done.

The US Department of Defense (DoD) reported on April 8 that the Russian armed forces have lost 15-20 percent of the “combat power” they had arrayed against Ukraine before the invasion.² This statement is somewhat (unintentionally) misleading because it uses the phrase “combat power” loosely. The US DoD statements about Russian “combat power” appear to refer to the percentage of troops mobilized for the invasion that are still in principle available for fighting—that is, that are still alive, not badly injured, and with their units. But “combat power” means much more than that. US Army doctrine defines combat power as “the total means of destructive, constructive, and information capabilities that a military unit or formation can apply at a given time.”³ It identifies eight elements of combat power: “leadership, information, command and control, movement and maneuver, intelligence, fires, sustainment, and protection.”⁴ This doctrinal definition obviously encompasses much more than the total number of troops physically present with units and is one of the keys to understanding why Russian forces have performed so poorly in this war despite their large numerical advantage. It is also the key to understanding the evolving next phase of the war.

US DoD statements that Russia retains 80-85 percent of its original mobilized combat power unintentionally exaggerate the Russian military's current capabilities to fight. Such statements taken in isolation are inherently ambiguous, for one thing. They could mean that 80-85 percent of the Russian **units** originally mobilized to fight in Ukraine remain intact and ready for

action while 15-20 percent have been destroyed. Were that the case, Russia would have tremendous remaining combat power to hurl against Ukraine. Or, they could mean that all the Russian units mobilized to invade Ukraine have each suffered 15-20 percent casualties, which would point to a greatly decreased Russian offensive capacity, as such casualty levels severely degrade the effectiveness of most military units. The reality, as DoD briefers and other evidence make clear, is more complicated, and paints a grim picture for Russian commanders contemplating renewing major offensive operations.

The dozens of Russian battalion tactical groups (BTGs) that retreated from around Kyiv likely possess combat power that is a fraction of what the numbers of units or total numbers of personnel with those units would suggest. Russian units that have fought in Ukraine have taken fearful damage.⁵ As the US DoD official noted on April 8, “We’ve seen indications of some units that are literally, for all intents and purposes, eradicated. There’s just nothing left of the BTG except a handful of troops, and maybe a small number of vehicles, and they’re going to have to be reconstituted or reapplied to others. We’ve seen others that are, you know, down 30 percent manpower.”⁶ Units with such levels of losses are combat ineffective—they have essentially zero combat power. A combination of anecdotal evidence and generalized statements such as these from US and other NATO defense officials indicates that most of the Russian forces withdrawn from the immediate environs of Kyiv likely fall into the category of units that will remain combat ineffective until they have been reconstituted.

Reconstituting these units to restore any notable fraction of their nominal power would take months. The Russian military would have to incorporate new soldiers bringing the units back up toward full strength and then allow those soldiers time to integrate into the units. It would also have to allow those units to conduct some unit training, because a unit is more than the sum of individual soldiers and vehicles. The combat power of a unit results in no small part from its ability to operate as a coherent whole rather than a group of individuals. It takes time even for well-trained professional soldiers to learn how to fight together, and Russian soldiers are far from well-trained. The unit would also have to replace lost and damaged vehicles and repair those that are repairable. The unit’s personnel would need time to regain their morale and will to fight, both badly damaged by the humiliation of defeat and the stress and emotional damage of the losses they suffered. These processes take a long time. They cannot be accomplished in a few weeks, let alone the few days the Russian command appears willing to grant. **Russian forces withdrawn from around Kyiv and going back to fight in Donbas in the next few weeks, therefore, will not have been reconstituted. At best, they will have been patched up and filled out not with fresh soldiers but with soldiers drawn from other battered and demoralized units. A battalion’s worth of such troops will not have a battalion’s worth of combat power.**

The Russian armed forces likely have few or no full-strength units in reserve to deploy to fight in Ukraine because of a flawed mobilization scheme that cannot be fixed in the course of a short war. The Russians did not deploy full regiments and brigades to invade Ukraine—with few exceptions as we have previously noted. They instead drew individual battalions from many different regiments and brigades across their entire force. We have identified elements of almost every single brigade or regiment in the Russian Army, Airborne Troops, and Naval Infantry involved in fighting in Ukraine already. The decision to form composite organizations drawn from individual battalions thrown together into ad hoc formations degraded the performance of those units, as we have discussed in earlier reports.⁷ **It has also committed the Russian military to replicating that mistake for the duration of this conflict, because there are likely few or no intact regiments or brigades remaining in the Russian Army, Airborne Forces, or Naval Infantry. The Russians have no choice but to continue throwing individual battalions**

together into ad hoc formations until they have rebuilt entire regiments and brigades, a process that will likely take years.

Reports of Russian efforts to mobilize new conscripts for current operations are also somewhat (unintentionally) misleading. Russia is well into its annual spring conscription phase that normally pulls around 130,000 young men into training for their one year of compulsory military service.⁸ The Russian military has also launched several other efforts to recruit new contract (professional) soldiers and to expand its reserve pool, as we have reported elsewhere.⁹ The US DoD official speaking on April 8 noted that the Russians appear to be trying to draw 60,000 reservists back to the force.¹⁰ The official noted, “it remains to be seen how successful they’ll be on this and where those reinforcements would go, how much training they would get.” This caveat is very important. Russia has likely already exhausted the pool of reservists whose initial conscript service and youth render them most likely to be effective in combat, as we have previously reported. The new batch of reservists are older, meaning that they are further away from their experience with military units and that their military skills and habits are likely seriously degraded.¹¹ The Russians should in principle take many weeks or months to retrain these reservists before integrating them back into combat units to fight. If they do not do so, then these reservists will likely add relatively little effective combat power to the units they join. The conscripts currently undergoing basic training are even further away from offering any significant boost in effective available combat power.¹² Rushing them to front-line units within the next few months will make them simply cannon fodder. **The Russians cannot expect to benefit from the roughly 200,000 conscripts and reservists they are currently mobilizing until late summer or fall at the earliest. If they send those people to fight sooner than that, they will suffer disproportionate casualties while adding little to the effective strength of any units they join.**

The Ukrainian government and military appear to share the general assessment offered above. Oleksiy Arestovich, chief advisor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, claimed on April 9 that the Ukrainian military has destroyed 20 BTGs and rendered 40 more combat ineffective.¹³ We cannot track individual BTG effectiveness that precisely, but this estimate that approximately one-third of the 180 BTGs Russia has available in and around Ukraine are combat ineffective is consistent with what we have observed.

Ukrainian officials also report that Russian recruitment and mobilization efforts are going poorly. Arestovich noted that Russian attempts to recruit young men into contract service are “going badly too.”¹⁴ Ukrainian military intelligence reported on April 9 that it has data showing very little interest among Russians in voluntarily joining the Russian military. Fewer than one percent of citizens in Ekaterinburg, Russia, were even willing to discuss signing up.¹⁵ The sample size is small (397 candidates), but the picture is consistent with previous reporting. The Russian effort to attract young men into professional reserves (the BARS program) had already been failing even before the war began, as we have previously reported.

Morale is a key element of combat power, and consistent reports indicate that the morale even of elite Russian units remains very low. A Russian Telegram channel reporting on Pskov, the home of the elite 76th Guards Airborne Division, noted on April 7 that a growing number of paratroopers are refusing to fight.¹⁶ It claimed that many paratroopers have submitted resignation papers, which commanders are refusing to accept. Some soldiers’ families have reportedly appealed to Russian courts to force the Russian military to accept the resignations. The channel claimed on April 6 that 60 paratroopers had refused to fight and were dismissed.¹⁷ The head of the Russian human rights organization Agora reported on April 8 that members of Russia’s National Guard (Rosgvardia) have refused to go to Ukraine or, having gone and come out, are refusing orders to return to the fight.¹⁸

Ukrainian military intelligence (GUR) additionally claimed on April 9 that Russian soldiers have been injuring themselves to avoid having to return to combat.¹⁹ The GUR reported on a transcript of a call it claims to have intercepted from a Russian officer to his wife complaining of lack of food, predicting that the war will not go well, and expressing the hope that he will live to draw his pension.²⁰ The GUR also reported that an elite Russian SPETSNAZ unit that had fought in Syria refused to continue fighting in Mariupol after suffering 30 casualties between April 2 and April 4.²¹ We have previously reported other instances of Russian soldiers and units refusing orders to fight or return to Ukraine after being pulled back.²²

Most of these reports are anecdotal and unconfirmed, but the picture they paint is coherent and accords with the observable performance of the Russian military in Ukraine to date. The Russians technically have enough healthy soldiers with weapons to pose a significant threat to eastern Ukraine, and they may wear down the Ukrainian defenders by sheer weight of numbers, although likely at a hideous cost. **But all indications are that the effective combat power of Russian reinforcements that might go to eastern Ukraine will be a small fraction of what the number of soldiers and units would indicate, and the outcome of the fight is therefore far from clear.** It is important to avoid allowing the shorthand DoD briefers and others understandably use to describe available Russian forces to lead to exaggerated estimates of the actual military capabilities of Russian forces.

The Russians are apparently attempting to resolve one of the problems from which their initial invasion suffered by making Southern Military District Commander General Alexander Dvornikov the single overall commander of operations in Ukraine.²³ At least two and possibly three officers had previously commanded separate axes, with Dvornikov responsible for the south and east while Western Military District Commander General Alexander Zhuravlyov commanded the north. Eastern Military District Commander Colonel General Alexander Chaiko may have commanded the troops drawn from his military district who attacked down the west bank of the Dnipro River, although we have no confirmation of that hypothesis. The lack of a single overall commander clearly hindered the cooperation of Russian forces operating along various invasion axes. The designation of Dvornikov as the overall commander makes sense now given that the announced Russian main efforts are almost all in his area of responsibility.

This simplification of the Russian command structure may not resolve all of Russia's command problems, however. Most of the reinforcements flowing into the Donbas region are drawn from other military districts, for one thing.²⁴ The active Russian offensive drive from Izyum to the southeast relies on the concentration of Russian forces around Kharkiv that draws in turn on the logistics hub of Belgorod in Russia—both in areas nominally under Zhuravlyov's control. Russian forces will likely continue to struggle to establish coherent and efficient command and control arrangements for the foreseeable future.

Russian forces continued offensive operations in Mariupol, along the Izyum-Slovyansk axis, and around Rubizhne and Popasna in the last 24 hours but made few gains.

Key Takeaways

- **Russia is unlikely to be able to mass combat power for the fight in eastern Ukraine proportionate to the number of troops and battalion tactical groups it sends there.**
- **The Russian military continues to suffer from devastating morale, recruitment, and retention problems that seriously undermine its ability to fight effectively.**
- **The outcome of forthcoming Russian operations in eastern Ukraine remains very much in question.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of April 09, 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.

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:

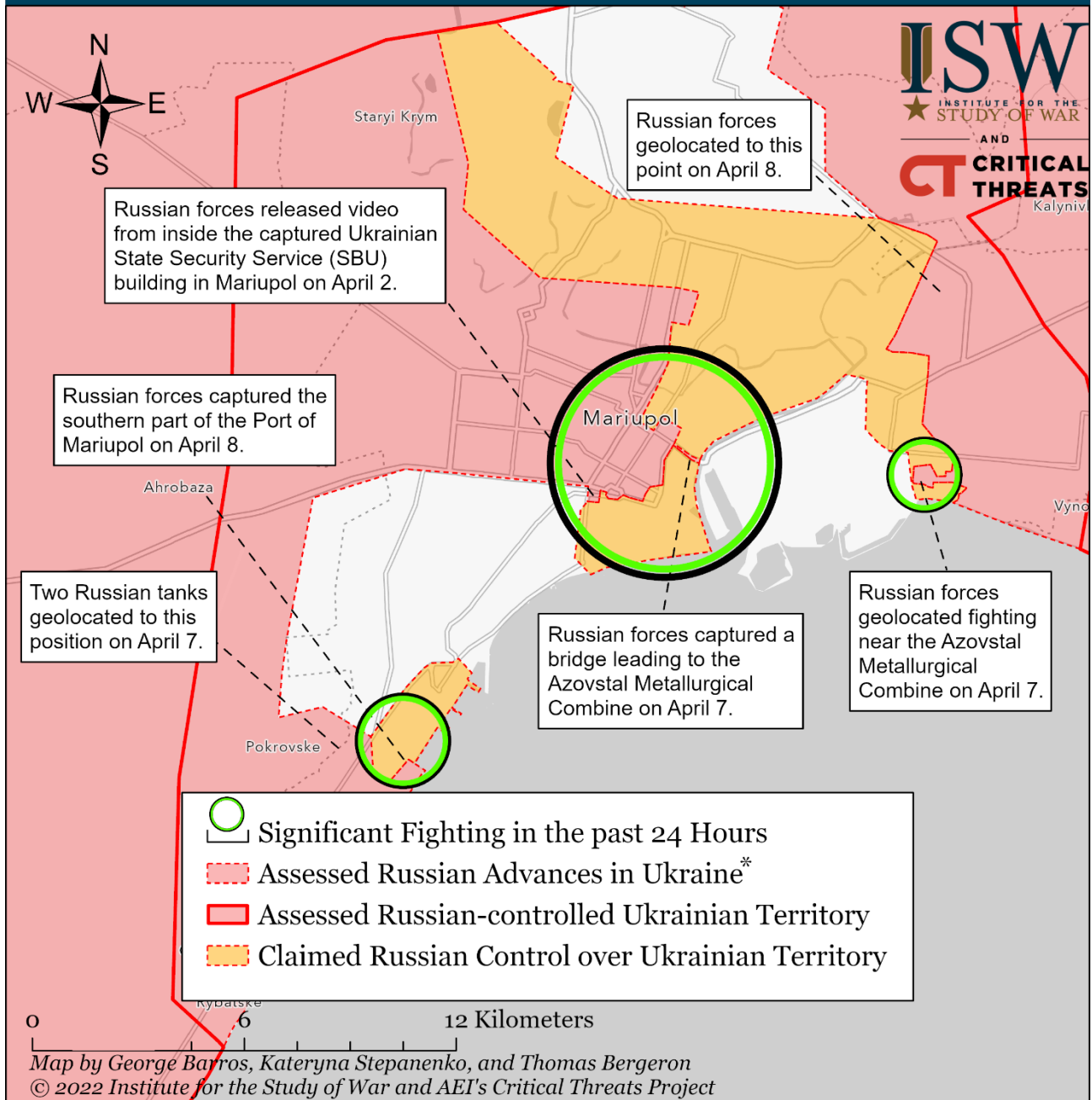
- Main effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate supporting efforts);
- Supporting effort 1—Kharkiv and Izyum;
- Supporting effort 2—Southern axis;
- Supporting effort 3—Sumy and northeastern Ukraine.

Main effort—Eastern Ukraine

Subordinate main effort—Mariupol (Russian objective: Capture Mariupol and reduce the Ukrainian defenders)

Russian forces continued offensive operations to complete the seizure of Mariupol in the last 24 hours but appear to have made few gains.²⁵

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Mariupol as of April 09, 2022, 3:00 ET



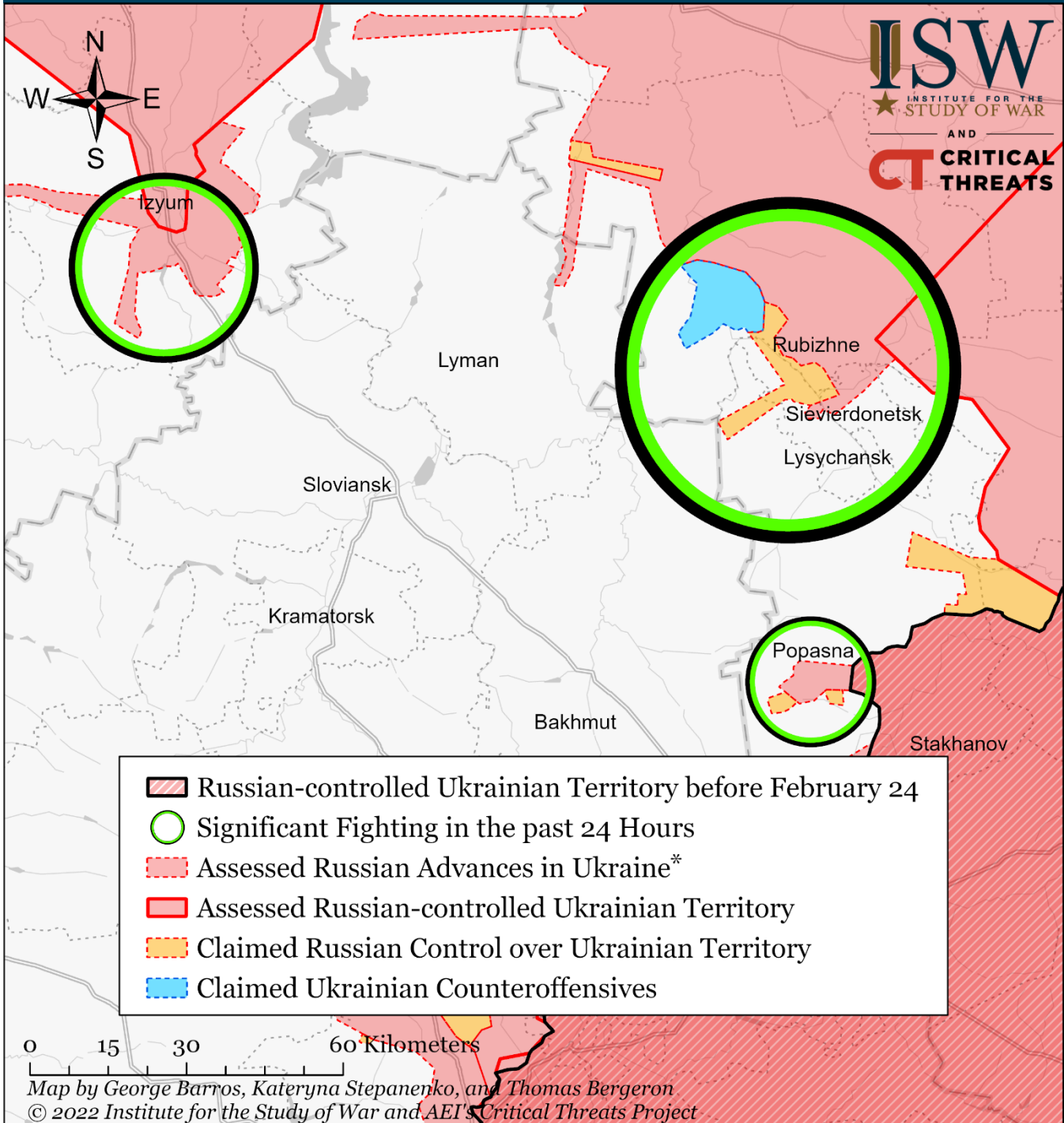
Russian forces continue their grinding advance into Mariupol, which they have encircled and are bombarding. Fighting is proceeding block-by-block and slowly. Russian forces began penetrating Mariupol's city center on March 24. The Donetsk People's Republic claimed on April 7 that Ukrainian forces retreated from residential areas to the Azovstal Metallurgical Combine. Russian forces attempted to attack Azovstal from central and northern Mariupol on April 7 and 8. Russian forces captured the southern part of the Port of Mariupol on April 8.

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

Subordinate main effort—Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces concentrated on attacking Rubizhne, Popasna, and Severodonetsk in the past 24 hours, although they did not make significant territorial gains.²⁶ Elements of the 423rd Motorized Rifle Regiment and 13th Tank Regiment, both of the 4th Guards Tank Division of the 1st Guards Tank Army (Western Military District) were reportedly observed near Severodonetsk.²⁷

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk as of April 09, 2022, 3:00 ET



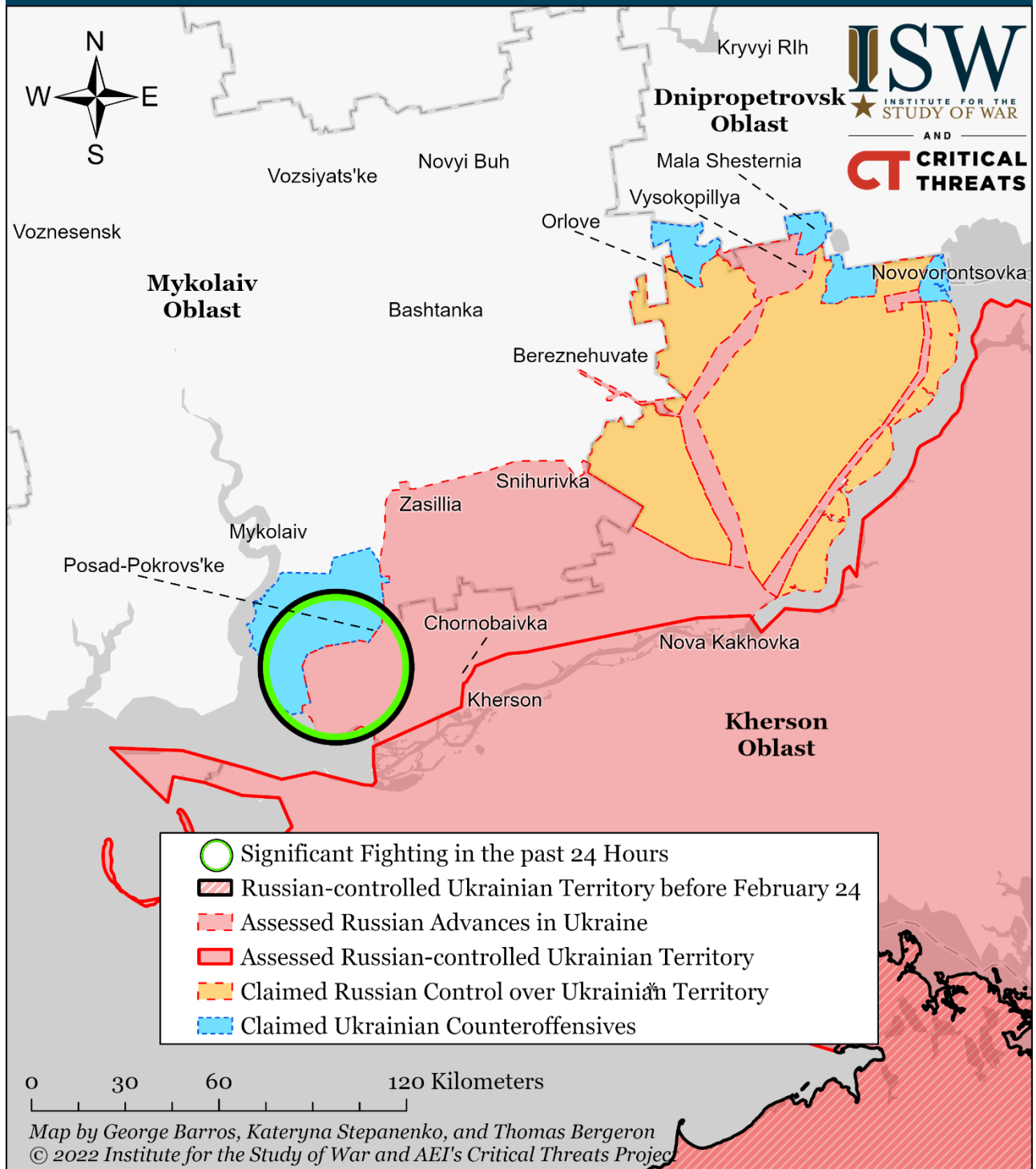
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Supporting Effort #1—Kharkiv and Izyum: (Russian objective: Advance southeast to support Russian operations in Luhansk Oblast, and fix Ukrainian forces around Kharkiv in place)

Russian forces continued to mass around Kharkiv likely in preparation to support the offensive southeast of Izyum toward Slovyansk.²⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on April 9 that two Russian BTGs deployed from Belgorod to the Kharkiv Shevchenkivskiy area on April 8 and that the Russians used electronic warfare measures to disrupt cellular service in order to conceal their movements.²⁹

Russian forces conducted a limited attack near Izyum on April 8 but made little progress, according to the Ukrainian General Staff.³⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of April 09, 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.

Supporting Effort #2—Southern axis: (Objective: Defend Kherson against Ukrainian counterattacks)

There was no significant activity reported on this axis in the past 24 hours.

Supporting Effort #3—Sumy and Northeastern Ukraine: (Russian objective: Withdraw combat power in good order for redeployment to eastern Ukraine)

There was no significant activity reported on this axis in the past 24 hours.

Immediate items to watch

- Russian forces will renew offensive operations in the coming days southeast from Izyum, possibly diverting first to the southwest to avoid Ukrainian defensive positions, in an effort to reach and seize Slovyansk.
- Russian forces will continue efforts to complete the seizure of the remaining areas of Mariupol city that Ukrainian forces hold.
- Russian forces may conduct attacks to seize Rubizhne, Popasna, and Severodonetsk in the coming days, although they may wait for reinforcements and for Russian troops to complete the encirclement of this area along the Izyum-Slovyansk-Debaltseve road.



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¹ <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-2;>
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² <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2994883/senior-defense-official-holds-a-background-briefing/>

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⁶ Senior Defense Official Holds a Background Briefing > U.S. Department of Defense > Transcript
⁷ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-3>;
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⁸ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/explainer-russian-conscription-reserve-and-mobilization>
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³⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/290946516551767>