

The Ukrainian Defense of Pokrovsk Has Compelled Russia to Change Its Approach in Eastern Ukraine

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Executive Summary: Russian forces launched offensive operations intended to seize Pokrovsk in Donetsk Oblast during Spring 2024 at the moment of greatest constraints on Ukraine's manpower and materiel following the suspension of US assistance in Fall 2023. Russian forces have not taken Pokrovsk after eight months of grinding but consistent advances in western Donetsk Oblast. Ukrainian defensive operations, based on the integration of successful Ukrainian drone innovators and operators with ground forces combined with constraints on Russia's strategic and operational-level manpower and materiel reserves have forced the Russian military command to abandon its original campaign design of a frontal assault on Pokrovsk. The Russian military command is currently attempting to envelop Pokrovsk from the southwest via Selydove and to even out the frontline west of Kurakhove and north of Vuhledar. Russian forces recently seized Selydove and are currently leveraging the seizure of Vuhledar to advance towards Kurakhove, but Russian advances have come at very high costs in troops and armored vehicles and months of time. Ukrainian drone operations continue to play a critical role in constraining Russian mechanized maneuver and preventing Russian forces from fully exploiting Ukraine's ongoing manpower constraints. Ukraine's ability to stave off the seizure of Pokrovsk thus far and force the Russian military to divert its efforts to advances in arguably the least operationally significant sector of the frontline is a positive indicator of Ukraine's ability to continue fighting this war despite the challenges Ukraine faces and the setbacks it has suffered.

Russian forces are currently attempting to conduct two simultaneous and supporting offensive operations to seize Pokrovsk through a turning maneuver via Selydove and to level the frontline from Pokrovsk to Yasna Polyana in order to collapse the Ukrainian salient west of Donetsk City and set conditions for future, possibly more operationally significant gains in Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces have consistently been advancing in the Pokrovsk and Kurakhove directions since March 2024, but have yet to make operationally significant advances in either direction. *ISW distinguishes between tactical gains, which are relevant at the tactical level of war in the near vicinity of fighting, and operational gains, which are significant at the operational level of war and affect large sectors of the entire frontline.* Ukrainian defenders have, thus far, successfully diverted Russian forces from a direct assault on Pokrovsk and convinced the Russian military command to expend manpower, equipment and time on less operationally significant gains in western Donetsk Oblast. Recent Russian advances near Selydove, the recent seizure of Vuhledar, and subsequent Russian advances north of Vuhledar are not yet operationally significant gains and have cost the Russians tremendous manpower and materiel losses. Russian forces will eventually make operationally significant gains if Ukrainian forces do not stop the ongoing Russian offensive operations, although Ukraine's ability to inflict notable manpower and materiel losses on the Russian military continues to depend on the provision of sufficient and regular Western military assistance. Significant Russian advances in the Pokrovsk and Kurakhove directions would be but one step in Russia's ongoing offensive campaign to seize the remainder of Donetsk Oblast and would not portend the immediate collapse of the frontline in Donetsk or throughout Ukraine.

Ukrainian drone operations continue to be the backbone of Ukraine's war effort, particularly in western Donetsk Oblast where successful Ukrainian drone operations contributed to forcing the Russian military command to reorient its primary operational effort for 2024. Ongoing Ukrainian manpower constraints and morale issues are currently creating vulnerabilities in Ukraine's defensive lines, and Ukrainian drone operations are likely playing an

outsized role in defending against and inflicting losses on advancing Russian forces.[1] Ukrainian drone operators have also played a critical role in constraining Russian mechanized maneuver and repelling platoon- to battalion-sized mechanized assaults throughout the frontline and in Kursk Oblast in 2024.[2] Ukrainian aerial and naval drone operators have played a critical role in undermining Russia's ability to facilitate and conduct its invasion of Ukraine on land and sea, and Russia has consistently underestimated the impact and influence of Ukraine's asymmetric drone capabilities and innovations throughout the war, to Russia's detriment.[3]

Russian President Vladimir Putin's articulated theory of victory assumes that Russian forces will be able to make and sustain gradual creeping advances indefinitely but does not appear to account for the possibility that Ukrainian forces could inflict losses sufficient to stall or stop future Russian offensive operations.[4] Recent Western estimates of Russian manpower losses suggest that Russian forces are currently losing more troops per month than Russia's ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts can sustain, and evidence is mounting that Russia cannot sustain the current rate of armored vehicle and tank losses in the medium term.[5] Ukrainian drone operators, particularly in the Pokrovsk direction, have successfully degraded Russian forces' mechanized capabilities and have slowed Russian forces' ability to make gains by forcing Russian infantry to advance primarily at foot pace.[6] The integration of Ukrainian drone operations with sufficiently resourced artillery and committed Ukrainian infantry units is and will remain essential in defending against Russian advances throughout the frontline.

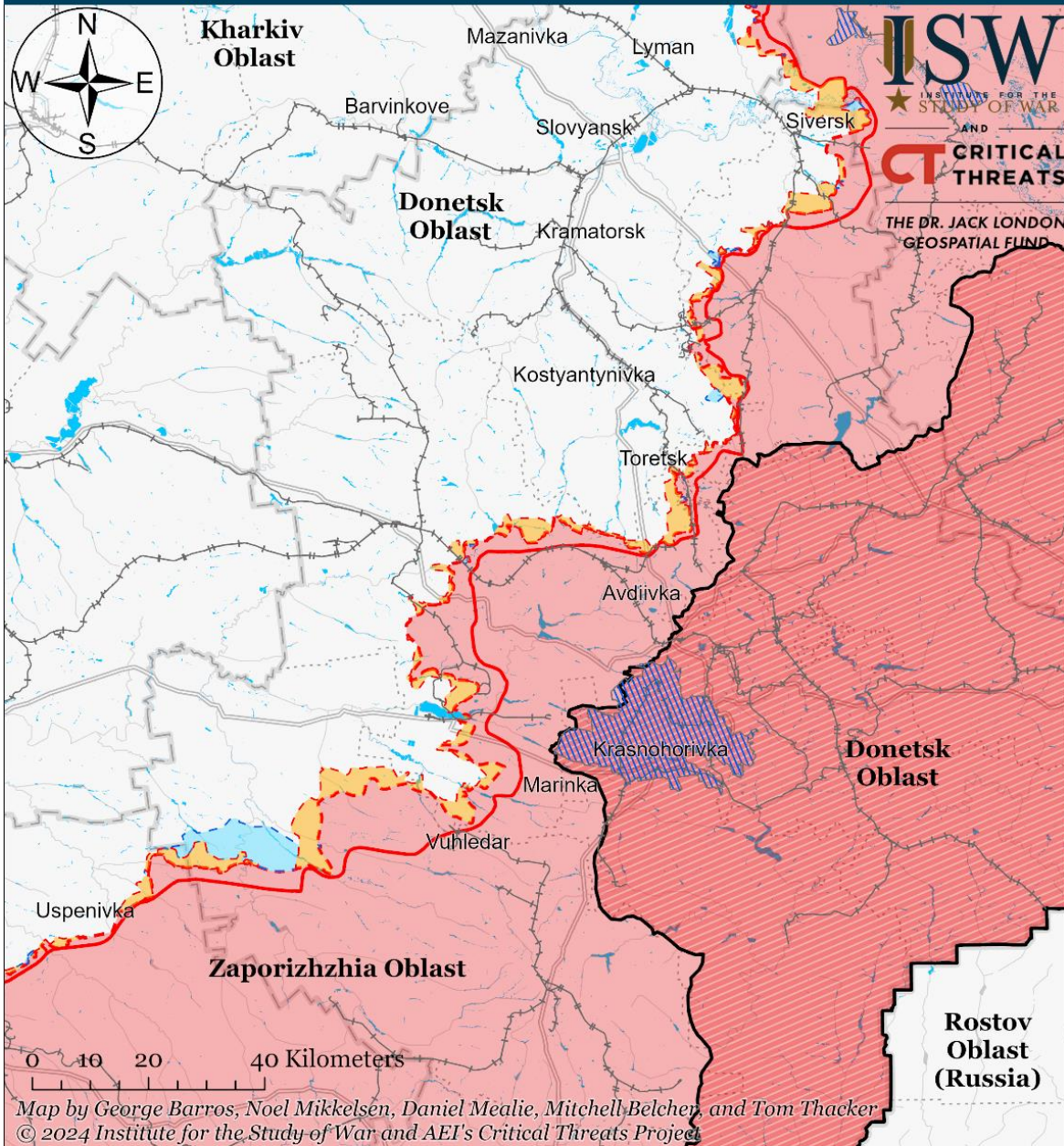
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 1, 2024, 1:30 PM ET



- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Major Railroads
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of November 14, 2024, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Mitchell Belcher, and Tom Thacker
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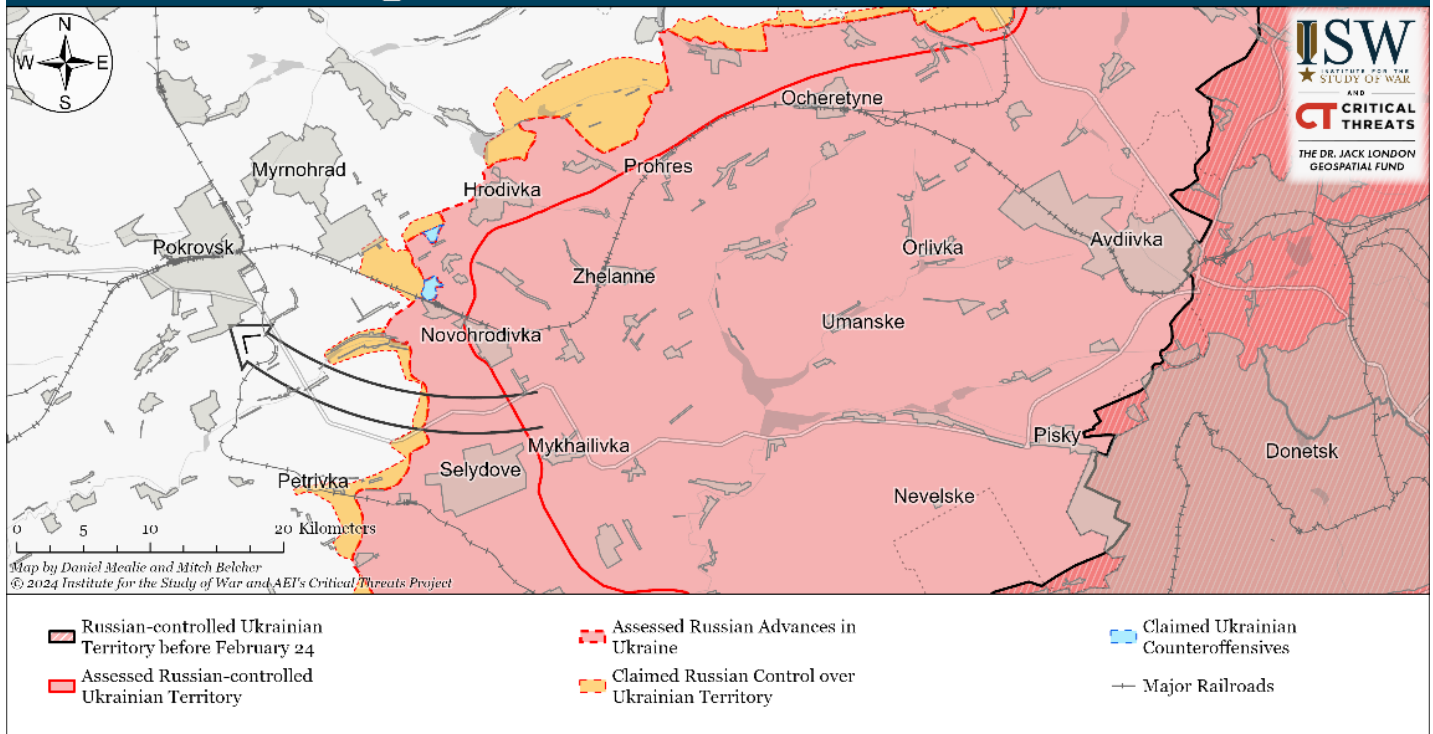
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Campaign

The seizure of Pokrovsk and leveling of the frontline in western Donetsk Oblast are two subordinate efforts of the Kremlin's wider campaign to seize the remainder of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts. Putin identified the complete seizure of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts as a priority goal of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Russian officials have reiterated this goal over the past three years.[7] Western and Ukrainian sources assessed in 2023 and 2024 that Russia intended to seize the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk by the end of 2024.[8] Russian offensive operations in the Siversk, Chasiv Yar, Toretsk, Pokrovsk, Kurakhove, and Velyka Novosilka directions are currently all aimed at seizing the remainder of Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces intensified localized assaults in the Velyka Novosilka and Siversk directions in October and November 2024 respectively, but it remains unclear if the Russian military command is willing to allocate the manpower necessary to launch a more concerted offensive operation or make operationally significant advances in these lower priority directions.[9] Russian advances near Chasiv Yar have largely stalled in 2024, and Russian forces have yet to advance into the center of the settlement, although the settlement remains at high risk. ISW has previously assessed that the Russian offensive effort to seize Chasiv Yar offers Russian forces the most immediate prospects for operationally significant advances in Donetsk Oblast as the seizure of Chasiv Yar would likely allow Russian forces to launch subsequent offensive operations against Ukraine's fortress belt – a group of major cities that form a significant defensive belt in Donetsk Oblast.[10] The Russian military command has, however, opted to prioritize offensive operations in the Toretsk, Pokrovsk, and Kurakhove directions, which provide Russian forces with less direct paths to operationally significant Ukrainian objects. Russian forces have yet to make operationally significant advances in exchange for notable manpower and materiel losses in 2024.

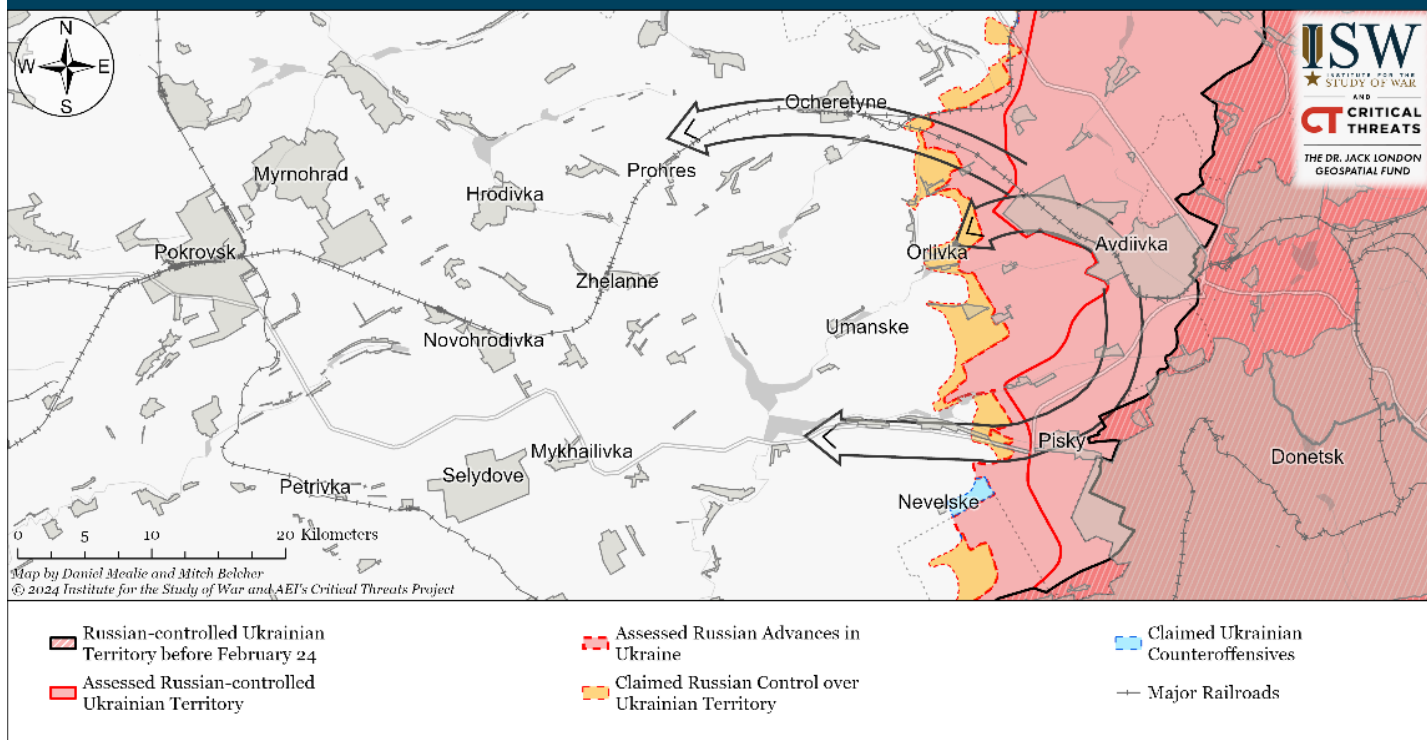
Russian forces seized a little over 2,000 square kilometers in Ukraine between October 1, 2023 and October 5, 2024, mostly in fields and small settlements and towns. They must seize an additional 9,322 square kilometers including several large urban areas in order to take the remainder of Donetsk Oblast as of November 14, and the seizure of Pokrovsk will likely only result in several tens of additional square kilometers. Assessed Russian positions south of Pokrovsk near Vyshneve and Sontsivka are currently Russian forces' closest positions to the Donetsk Oblast administrative boundary in the Toretsk, Pokrovsk, or Kurakhove directions and are roughly 22-23 kilometers from the boundary as of November 14. Russian advances in the Toretsk direction have been slow in 2024, as Russian forces have largely spent the last five months struggling through highly urbanized areas, and Russian forces' rate of advance is unlikely to increase significantly in this sector until Russian forces advance through Toretsk and its more urbanized suburbs. Russian gains in the Kurakhove pocket will result in additional territorial advances, but these gains do not shift Russian positions significantly closer to the Donetsk Oblast administrative boundaries than Russian forces' current closest assessed point of advance. Russian forces could attempt to connect the Chasiv Yar, Toretsk, and Pokrovsk-Kurakhove efforts in the future by trying to advance north from Pokrovsk towards Toretsk and to force Ukrainian forces to withdraw from positions in Toretsk, although it would likely take the Russian military months to make gains of this scale at its current rate of advance.[11] It remains unclear if Russian forces would be sufficiently combat capable to conduct such an operation without an operational pause to reconstitute after evening out the frontline in western Donetsk Oblast and seizing Pokrovsk.

Primary Operational Objective of Russian Offensive Operations in Pokrovsk Raion



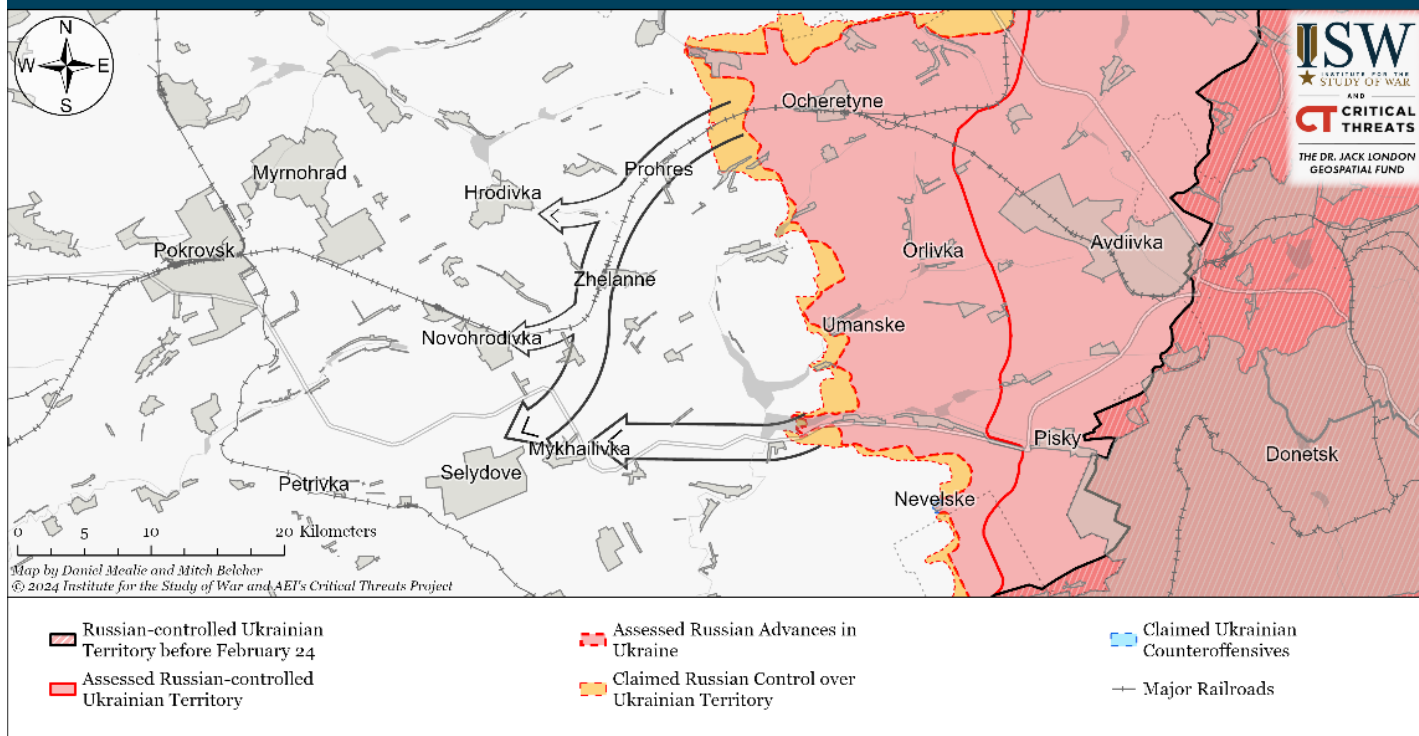
Russian forces launched offensive operations intended to seize Pokrovsk during Spring 2024 following the seizure of Avdiivka and at a moment when Ukraine's manpower and materiel constraints reached their peak. Russian forces intensified offensive operations in Pokrovsk Raion in October 2023 when they began the four-month-long battle for Avdiivka and maintained a consistent tempo of operations in the area until seizing Avdiivka on February 17, 2024 – at which point Russian forces temporarily paused offensive operations.[12] The Russian military command tasked the Russian Central Grouping of Forces and 51st Combined Arms Army (formerly the 1st Donetsk People's Republic Army Corps [DNR AC]) with exploiting the seizure of Avdiivka to make further gains west of the settlement.[13] The Russian Central Grouping of Forces resumed a high tempo of assaults several days later and began the offensive operation aimed at seizing Pokrovsk through a frontal assault in late February and early March 2024.[14] Russian forces in this area benefited from Ukrainian manpower and materiel constraints, partially driven by delays in Western-provided military assistance, between March and June 2024 and made consistent gains west of Avdiivka in the direction of Pokrovsk.[15] Ukrainian officials and frontline servicemembers consistently warned about an increasing disparity between Russian and Ukrainian artillery use during this time and suggested that Ukrainian forces were increasingly husbanding ammunition and relying on drone operators to defend against Russian infantry and mechanized assaults.[16]

Path of Russian Advances in Pokrovsk Raion as of March 1, 2024



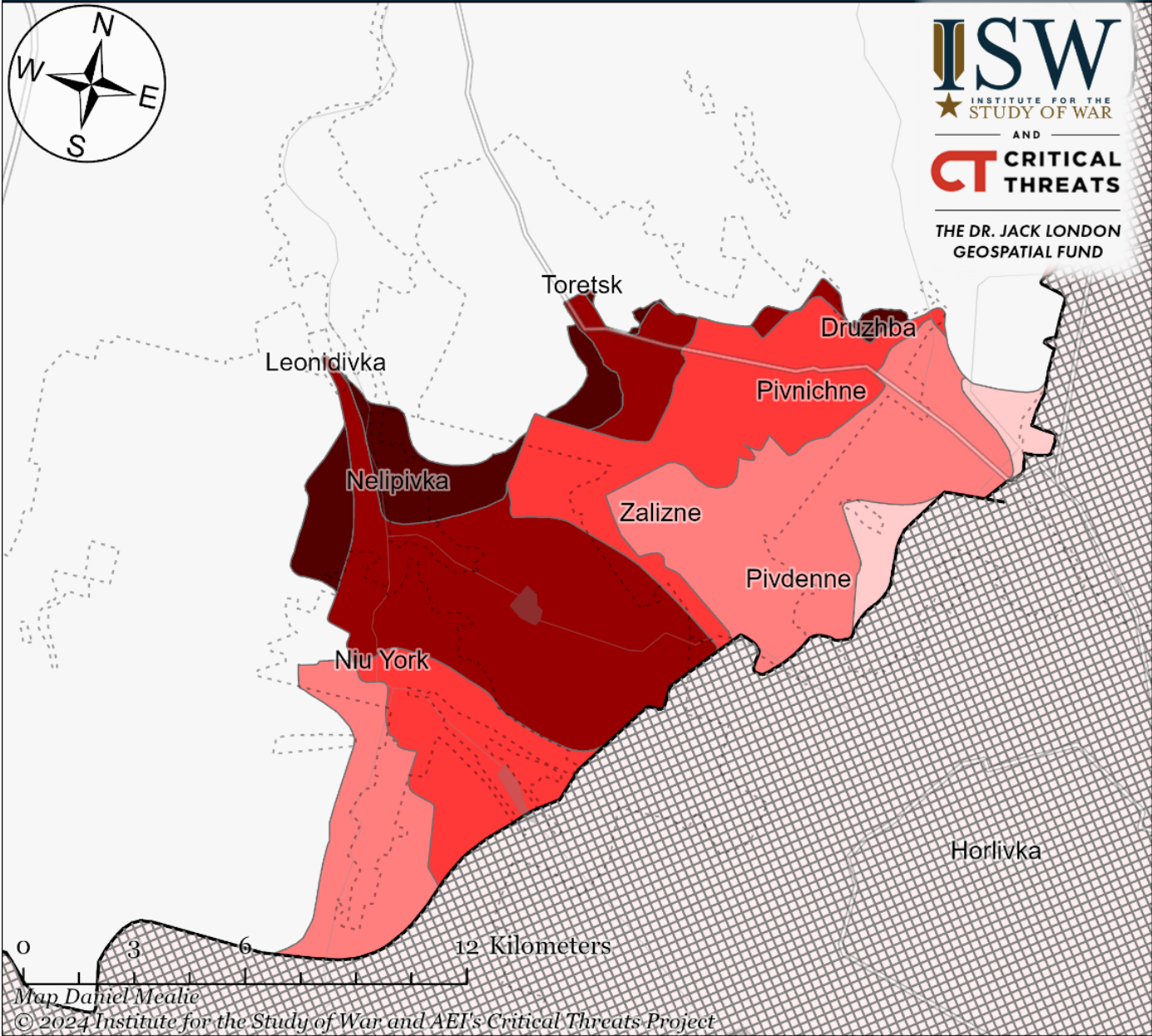
Russia’s likely intended primary offensive effort for Summer 2024 was a direct assault on Pokrovsk following the railway line west of Avdiivka and the seizure of both Myrnohrad and Pokrovsk. The Avdiivka-Ocheretyne-Zhelanne-Novohrodivka-Pokrovsk railway line proved to be an advantageous path for Russian advances during Spring and Summer 2024, as settlements along the railway line were critical lynchpins in Ukraine’s defensive lines in this direction. Russian forces advanced northwest from Avdiivka along the railway line and west from Avdiivka towards Ukraine’s main defensive line along the Berdychi-Orlivka-Vodyane line in March and April 2024, and elements of the Russian Central Grouping of Forces reportedly exploited a bungled Ukrainian rotation to make a narrow penetration near Ocheretyne in late April 2024.[17] The Russian exploitation force, mainly comprised of Central Military District [CMD] brigades and elements of the 51st CAA, continued to advance west of Ocheretyne in May and June 2024 and forced Ukrainian forces to retreat from the Berdychi-Orlivka-Tonenke to more defensible positions along the Prohres-Skuchne-Karlivka line on the east (left) bank of the Vovcha River.[18] Russian materiel advantages peaked during May and June 2024, and Ukrainian officials identified “overwhelming [Russian] air superiority” and a 20-to-one Russian artillery advantage as main contributing factors to the Russian advances in the Pokrovsk direction.[19] Ukrainian officials noted in May and June 2024 that Russian forces were mainly advancing via infantry assaults using ATVs or motorcycles and conducting very few mechanized assaults in the Pokrovsk direction.[20] A Russian milblogger claimed in early June 2024 that specialized Ukrainian drone units were heavily targeting and destroying unprotected Russian armored equipment in the Pokrovsk direction, inhibiting Russian offensive operations in the area – and more effective Ukrainian drone operations in this direction likely played a role in the Russian military command’s decision to limit mechanized activity in this direction moving forward.[21]

Path of Russian Advances in Pokrovsk Raion as of July 1, 2024

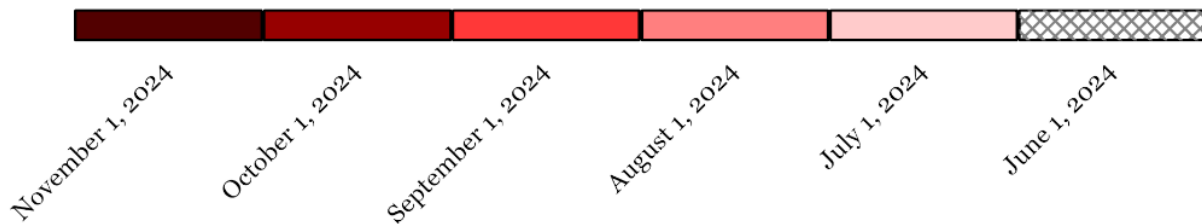


Further Russian advances east of Pokrovsk near Prohres and later Zhelanne during July and August 2024 notably drove Ukrainian back from the east (left) bank of the Vovcha River towards the Hrodivka-Novohrodivka-Selydove line (east to southeast of Pokrovsk) as Russian forces prioritized advances along the railway line and advanced more slowly through the fields and small settlements west and southwest of Avdiivka.^[22] Russian forces conducted two successful turning maneuvers around Hrodivka and Novohrodivka by advancing along the railway line in late August 2024 and largely forced Ukrainian forces to retreat from the settlements without having to conduct costly, frontal assaults.^[23] Russian milbloggers claimed on August 29 that likely Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups advanced into the southeastern outskirts of Myrnohrad (immediately east of Pokrovsk) and began small arms combat with Ukrainian forces in the town, but ISW has yet to observe confirmation of Russian forces operating in Myrnohrad.^[24] These reports, if accurate, suggest that Russian forces may have temporarily advanced into Myrnohrad and that Ukrainian forces later pushed Russian forces from the town and have consistently defended against Russian advances into the town since late August 2024. Russian advances along the Novohrodivka-Hrodivka-Myrnohrad-Pokrovsk line stalled as of September 2024 as the Russian military command increasingly devoted manpower and resources to offensive operations along the Selydove-Hirnyk line and in the Kurakhove and Vuhledar directions.

Russian Territorial Advances near Toretzk, Donetsk Oblast, Between June 1, 2024 and November 1, 2024

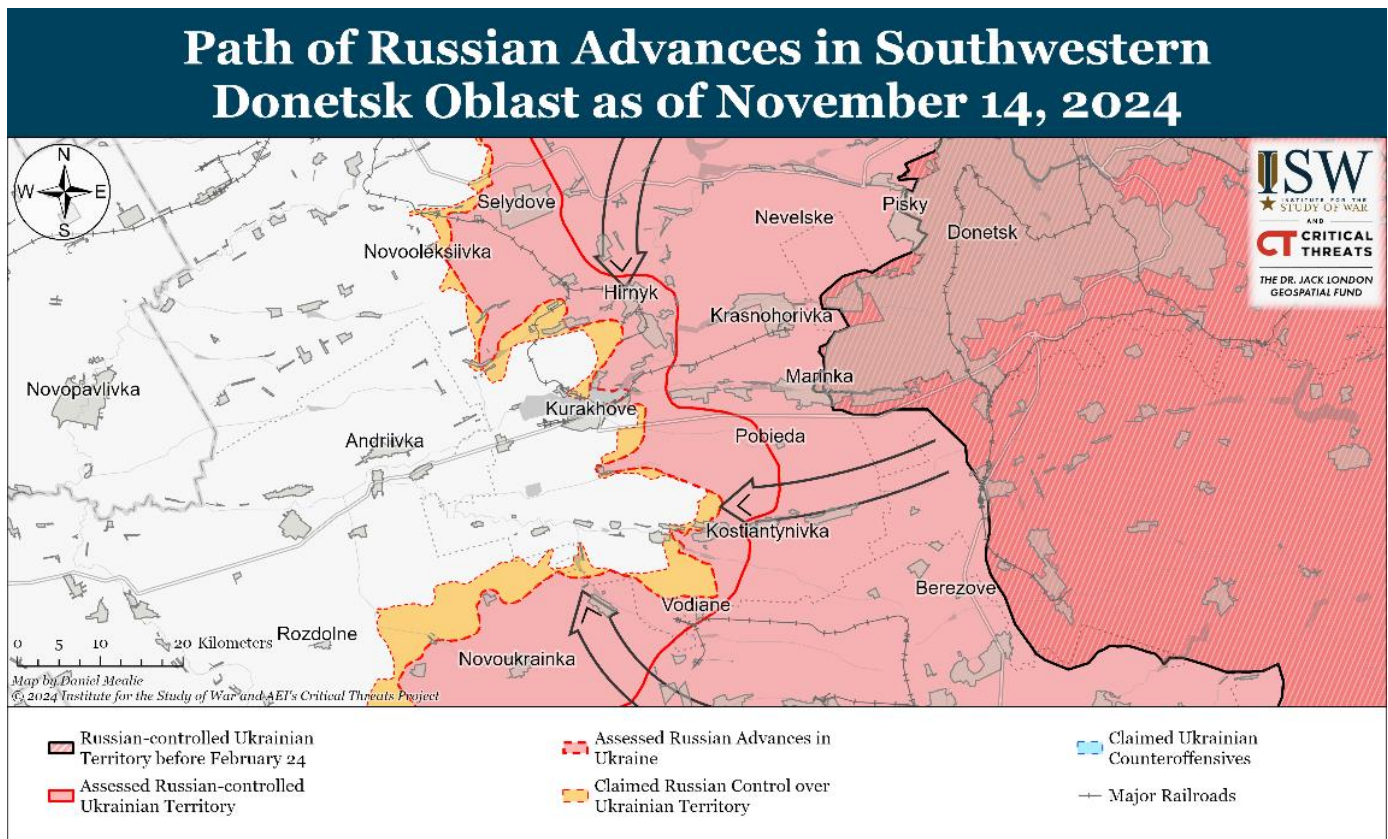


Assessed Russian-occupied Territory in Ukraine



Russian forces also renewed offensive operations aimed at seizing Toretsk and intensified offensive operations west and southwest of Donetsk City in June 2024. The Russian military command redeployed some elements of the Russian Central Grouping of Forces and 51st CAA, including the CMD's 27th Motorized Rifle Division, from the Pokrovsk direction to renewed assaults in the Toretsk direction in mid-June 2024.[25] The decision roughly doubled the length of the Central Grouping of forces area of responsibility (AOR) and drew some units away from the CMD's exploitation force in the Pokrovsk direction.[26] The Russian military command likely intended to eliminate the Ukrainian salient in the Toretsk direction to deny Ukrainian forces the ability to shell rear Russian areas of the Chasiv Yar and Pokrovsk directions, but Russian forces have yet to make gains significant enough to deny Ukrainian artillery operations in the area as of November 2024.[27] Russian assaults in the Toretsk direction have been characterized by infantry-heavy assaults in highly urbanized areas that have slowed Russian advances – as Russian forces have historically struggled with urban combat in Ukraine.[28]

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief Colonel General Oleksandr Syrskyi noted in mid-June 2024 that Russian forces were also concentrating efforts and assault units in the Kurakhove direction, and ISW observed a minor intensification in Russian activity in the Kurakhove direction at this time.[29] Russian forces began consistently conducting platoon- and company-sized mechanized assaults in western Donetsk Oblast in June 2024 and further intensified mechanized activity when Russian force began to conduct occasional battalion-sized mechanized assaults in the area in late July 2024.[30] Russian forces did not begin to make significant advances in the Kurakhove direction until July and August 2024 and have continued to make advances in this area in recent months.



The Russian military command amended its Summer 2024 campaign design likely after assessing that Russian forces were unlikely to seize Pokrovsk in a frontal assault and decided instead to attempt to envelop Pokrovsk from the south via Selydove and to intensify offensive operations west of Donetsk City and near Vuhledar in order to eliminate the Ukrainian salient in western Donetsk Oblast along the Hirnyk-Kurakhove-Vuhledar line. ISW observed reports that elements of the CMD's 90th Tank Division – a formation heavily involved in the CMD's exploitation force - conducted a reinforced battalion-sized mechanized assault southwest of Donetsk City in late July 2024.[31] The further expansion of the Central Grouping of Forces AoR into both the Toretsk and Kurakhove directions in June and July 2024 indicated that the Russian military command had likely re-tasked the CMD from acting as an exploitation force to being responsible for the bulk of Russia's main offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast.[32] The Russian military command likely reassessed its campaign design and determined that Russian forces were unlikely to make rapid tactical gains in this direction or successfully seize Pokrovsk in an attritional, frontal assault. At this point, the Russian military command decided to attempt a turning maneuver via Selydove in order to avoid fighting through more built-up Ukrainian defenses immediately east of Pokrovsk and reprioritized leveling the frontline in western Donetsk Oblast. The Russian military command likely identified the seizure of Selydove, Vuhledar, and Kurakhove and leveling of the frontline in western Donetsk Oblast as desired prerequisites for launching an intensified offensive effort against Pokrovsk itself. Shortening and leveling the frontline in western Donetsk Oblast will free up Russian troops currently attacking all along the Ukrainian pocket north and south of Kurakhove to redeploy to the Pokrovsk effort and will secure Russian forces' southern flank for a renewed assault on Pokrovsk.

The Russian military command's new campaign design sought to take advantage of the most effective tactics in each respective frontline sector. A Ukrainian drone operator told the *Associated Press* (AP) in August 2024 that Russian forces had been relatively successful in the Pokrovsk direction because they were conducting ground attacks in groups of two to four soldiers under the cover of trees, making them harder for Ukrainian drone operators to detect.[33] An official in a Ukrainian brigade operating near Selydove reported in mid-September 2024 that Russian forces began moving in small infantry groups and using windbreaks and buildings for cover instead of conducting head-on frontal assaults with larger groups.[34] A Russian milblogger and former Storm-Z instructor noted on November 16 that small, infantry-led assaults are not the most efficient tactic for expedient advances in the rural settlements and fields near Selydove, where Russian forces have very little coverage from Ukrainian drone operations.[35] The milblogger suggested that Ukrainian drone operations are constraining Russian forces' ability to bring reinforcements and supplies to forward positions. Russian forces' ability to utilize windbreaks and forested areas as cover against Ukrainian drone operators and advance into vulnerable Ukrainian positions has been a critical aspect of their ability to advance in the Pokrovsk direction in recent months, particularly since Russian forces have not widely utilized armored vehicles in this area.[36] Russian forces may increase their use of armored vehicles in the Pokrovsk direction if muddy ground conditions begin to significantly constrain infantry movement, however.

Russian mechanized activity in the Kurakhove and Vuhledar directions has been notably more successful than in the Pokrovsk direction or other sectors of the frontline, and more effective mechanized activity has facilitated marginally more rapid Russian advances in western Donetsk Oblast. ISW observed a notable intensification in Russian mechanized activity in the Kurakhove and Vuhledar directions in October 2024, when Russian forces began conducting regular platoon- to battalion-sized mechanized assaults in these directions.[37] Russian mechanized assaults in this direction have been significantly more successful than in other frontline sectors. Russian mechanized assaults frequently

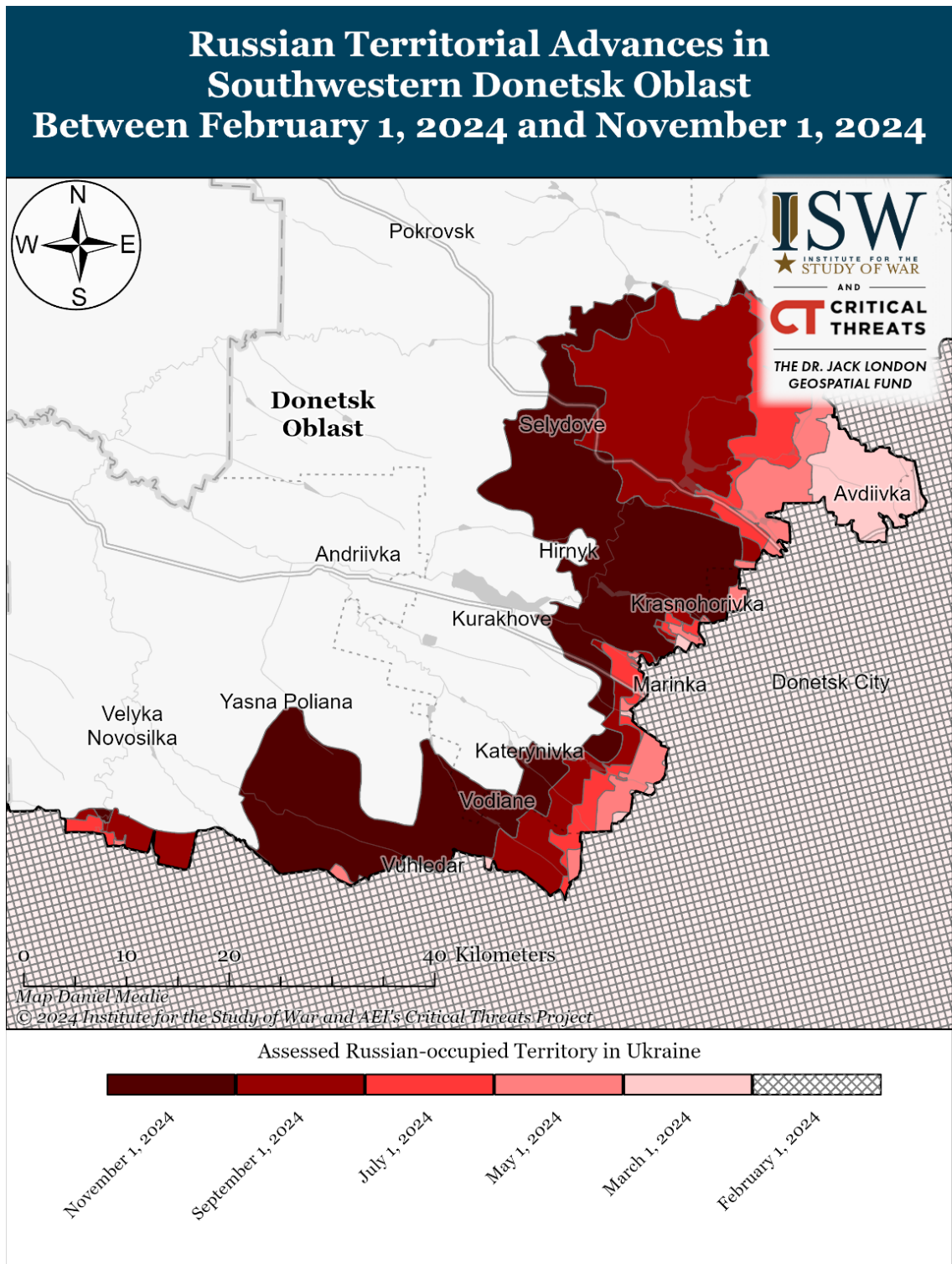
fail to result in advances and typically only result in armored vehicles losses in most sectors of the frontline, but Russian mechanized activity in the Kurakhove and Vuhledar directions has repeatedly resulted in several kilometers of advances. Russian forces notably advanced several kilometers to the outskirts of Hostre (northeast of Kurakhove) in September 2024, and Russian mechanized activity has been the foundation of Russian advances north and northwest of Vuhledar in October and November 2024.[38] Russian mechanized activity in these directions is not indicative of a substantial improvement in Russian forces' ability to conduct the kind of rapid mechanized maneuver that would be necessary to restore mechanized maneuver to the battlefield at scale, however. The most successful Russian assaults in this area still result in high armored vehicle losses in exchange for a few kilometers of gains, but the increased efficacy of Russian mechanized activity in the Kurakhove and Vuhledar directions is still notable. Recent mechanized assaults in September and November 2024 also resulted in tactically significant Russian advances in the Kupyansk direction, and the Russian military may be looking to replicate the conditions that have increased the efficacy of mechanized activity in the Kurakhove and Vuhledar directions in other areas of the frontline.[39]

Russian forces also continued offensive operations in the Toretsk direction during late Summer and Fall 2024, but the pace of Russian advances has remained slow as Russian forces have largely relied on infantry to make advances in this direction.[40] Ukrainian forces have consistently and successfully counterattacked in the Toretsk direction more than in any other sector of western Donetsk Oblast, and successful Ukrainian counterattacks have helped limit the scope and rate of Russian advances in the area.[41] ISW assessed that Russian forces have seized 23.1 percent of Toretsk itself as of November 13 and Russian forces have advanced fewer than 10 kilometers in this direction from the June 2024 frontline as of November 14. Russian forces in Toretsk do not currently pose any significant threat to Ukrainian positions west of Toretsk and have likely taken notable manpower losses in exchange for these marginal gains as in other frontline sectors.

The Russian military command's new campaign design also may have sought to minimize the impact of increased Russian manpower constraints caused by the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast in August 2024. Russian authorities were reportedly aware of the threat of a Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast in the months leading up to August 2024, but the incursion has undoubtably tested Russia's ability to generate and redeploy forces in response to an unexpected attack.[42] ISW has observed indications that the Russian military command redeployed forces from almost all sectors of the frontline, including elements of one unit from the Pokrovsk direction, to Kursk Oblast to address the incursion.[43] Russian forces have redeployed elements of several elite formations to Kursk Oblast, including: the 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet [BSF]), 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet, Eastern Military District [EMD]), 98th, 104th, and 7th airborne (VDV) divisions, and 11th and 83rd VDV brigades.[44] The Russian military command generally regards VDV and naval infantry elements as more "elite" forces (despite the fact that these forces have been degraded and misused during the war) and tends to deploy these forces to prioritized directions.[45] The Russian military command would have likely redeployed these forces to reinforce efforts in the Pokrovsk direction if Ukrainian forces had not launched the Kursk incursion in August 2024.

Ukrainian officials noted in September 2024 that the incursion "slowed" Russian advances in Donetsk Oblast and complicated Russia's plans for offensive operations, including in Russia's "main direction" – likely referring to the Pokrovsk direction.[46] Russian forces notably launched their offensive operation in northern Kharkiv Oblast in mid-May 2024 several months before the incursion, and the

operation has also placed increased pressure on Russia’s manpower reserves by committing forces that could have otherwise fought in the Pokrovsk offensive.[47] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated in October 2024 that the Russian military command originally intended to commit most of Russia's manpower reserves to the Kharkiv and Pokrovsk-Toretsk directions during late Summer and Fall 2024, but that the Ukrainian incursion into Kursk Oblast and slowing Russian advances in northern Kharkiv Oblast complicated this plan.[48]



Recent Russian advances and Russian forces' ability to exploit the recent seizure of Selydove and Vuhledar could force Ukrainian forces to withdraw to more defensible positions in western Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces have not turned north towards Pokrovsk following the seizure of Selydove but rather have continued to advance south as Russian forces operating southeast of Selydove intensified offensive operations along the Tsukuryne-Hirnyk-Kurakhivka line^[49]^[OBJ]. Russian forces operating southeast of Selydove currently appear to be attempting to eliminate the Ukrainian salient north of the Kurakhivske Reservoir and to envelop Kurakhove from the reservoir's northwestern edge. Russian positions in Sontsivka (south of Selydove) are currently four kilometers from the northwestern edge of the reservoir, and it remains unclear how long Ukrainian forces operating east of the Sontsivka-Stary Terny line will be able to hold positions in this small salient. Russian forces have also successfully exploited the seizure of Vuhledar to make tactically significant advances south of Kurakhove, and recent Russian advances in the area may force Ukrainian forces to withdraw from the fields southeast and south of Kurakhove to more defensible positions further west^[50]^[OBJ].

A more level frontline in western Donetsk Oblast will provide Russian forces a more easily defensible flank should they turn north and attempt to envelop Toretsk from the west and attack Kostyantynivka and Ukraine's fortress belt from the south, but the leveling of the frontline does not immediately portend such advances. Russian forces could also attempt to advance further towards the Donetsk Oblast administrative boundaries along the Kurakhove-Zaporizhzhia City H-15 highway or conduct an assault on Velyka Novosilka from the east. Russian forces are unlikely to be sufficiently combat effective to undertake a major offensive effort without conducting at least a temporary pause for rest and reconstitution, and several settlements west of Kurakhove could afford strong defensive positions for Ukrainian forces. In the unlikely event that Russian forces could advance to the Donetsk Oblast administrative boundary west of Kurakhove, current Russian positions in the Siversk, Chasiv Yar, and Toretsk directions are still roughly 70 kilometers from the Donetsk Oblast administrative boundary at their closest point. Russian forces remain unable to conduct the kind of rapid mechanized maneuver necessary to make advances to that magnitude with the kind of speed or surprise that could collapse Ukraine's defenses in Donetsk Oblast.

Conclusion

The seizure of Pokrovsk remains an important operational and informational goal for the Kremlin, and Russian forces will likely pursue the seizure of Pokrovsk in Winter 2024-25. Ukrainian officials have repeatedly identified Pokrovsk as Russian forces' primary operational objective for the Summer-Fall 2024 campaign.^[51] Kremlin-awarded founder and director of the prominent Rybar Telegram channel and social media project Mikhail Zvinchuk acknowledged in an interview with Russian-language diaspora-focused channel RTVI on November 16 that the Russian military intends to advance on Pokrovsk from the south and southeast this winter now that Russian forces have seized Selydove.^[52] Zvinchuk noted that the Russian military intends to prioritize advancing in urban areas such as Toretsk, Pokrovsk, and Kurakhove and improving Russia's drone operations during Winter 2024-25, as Russian forces currently "cannot advance" due to Ukrainian drone operations. The Russian military command will likely task Russian forces with seizing Pokrovsk should Russian forces successfully level the frontline between Selydove and Yasna Polyana (northwest of Vuhledar) in the coming weeks and months, although Russian forces may have to conduct a short operational pause to redeploy, rest, and reconstitute before beginning the assault on Pokrovsk. The

Russian military command is unlikely to abandon the seizure of Pokrovsk as a major objective as control over Pokrovsk would provide Russian forces with a defensible position that could support Russia's envisioned new defensive line in western Donetsk Oblast. The Kremlin is also unlikely to support abandoning the seizure of Pokrovsk given how many lives and how much materiel Russia has expended in pursuit of the town, and the Kremlin likely intends to exaggerate the importance of seizing Pokrovsk to domestic and international audience as part of Putin's ongoing narrative about the inevitability of Russian victory in Ukraine.

Russia's offensive effort to seize Pokrovsk and level the frontline in western Donetsk Oblast is emblematic of Putin's theory of victory. The Russian military command appears to have willingly abandoned its original campaign design and intention to make the CMD a rapid exploitation and maneuver force and accepted of the realities of positional warfare and slower Russian advances in the Pokrovsk, Kurakhove, and Vuhledar directions.[53] It is too soon to judge the impact of this decision on the war's eventual resolution. The Russian military command's decision to embrace and exploit the characteristics of positional warfare are based on the assumption that Russia's war machine, with support from its allies in Iran, the People's Republic of China (PRC), and North Korea, can outlast Ukraine and its Western allies. ISW has recently observed indications to the contrary, however. Russian forces lost roughly 80,000 troops during September and October 2024, but likely only recruited an estimated 60-70,000 into military service— indicating that the Russian military's recruitment rates have begun to fall behind Russia's previous one-to-one loss replacement rate.[54] Ukrainian and Western assessments repeatedly place Russian domestic production rates of tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery systems far below estimated rates of loss for these systems in Ukraine.[55] Apathy towards the war and resistance to greater social and economic hardship also appears to be growing within Russian society as the war drags on – suggesting that it is also in the Kremlin's interest to resolve the war as soon as possible in order to avoid exacerbating domestic discontent.[56]

Putin's theory of victory does not account for these issues nor for the impact of Ukraine's increasing asymmetric capabilities. Ukrainian forces have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment and ability to develop and employ alternative and asymmetric capabilities, namely drones and long-range strikes, to partially counter Russia's artillery advantage in Ukraine and to defend against Russian mechanized and infantry assaults, often generating outsized effects considering the inexpensive systems Ukrainian forces are employing. Ukrainian drone operators have played a key role in constraining Russian mechanized maneuver in western Donetsk Oblast and Russian infantry assaults throughout the frontline in Ukraine.[57] Ukraine's long-range drone strikes against Russian oil depots and warehouses storing military equipment continue to complicate Russian logistics, force Russia to reallocate air defense assets, and burden Russia's war chest.[58] Russian defeat, and Ukraine's future success, rests on Ukraine's ability to further leverage these asymmetric capabilities to support successful ground operations and directly challenge Russian forces' control over the theater-wide initiative.[59]

Ukrainian forces have stalled Russia's main offensive efforts for the Summer-Autumn 2024 campaign and forced the Russian military command to expend significant resources and valuable time on advances that have not brought Russian forces geographically closer to their main operational objective. Ukraine's ability to trade space for time undermines the Kremlin's theory of victory and narrative of an inevitable

Russian victory in Ukraine. Ukrainian forces have successfully stalled Russian forces near Chasiv Yar, Toretsk, and Pokrovsk for many months and continue to complicate Russian offensive operations in the Siversk and Lyman directions. Russian forces are currently exploiting localized Ukrainian vulnerabilities to advance in the Kurakhove and Vuhledar directions, but Ukrainian forces are attempting to counterattack into the flanks of advancing Russian forces in these directions.[60] The leveling of the frontline in western Donetsk Oblast does not bring Russian forces substantially closer to their main operational objective of seizing Pokrovsk and only brings Russian forces several kilometers closer to their longer-term objective of seizing the remainder of Donetsk Oblast. Ukrainian forces have inflicted significant losses on the Russian military but must completely stop Russian advances in western Donetsk Oblast or risk Russian forces eventually advancing into more operationally significant areas of Donetsk in the medium- to long-term, however.

Ukraine's ability to defend against more operationally significant Russian advances is still largely dependent on the delivery of timely Western aid and Ukraine's ability to overcome its manpower constraints. Ukraine will have an opportunity to contest the initiative following the future culmination of Russian offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast if Ukraine receives sufficient and proactive Western military assistance. Previous delays in Western security assistance undermined Ukraine's Summer 2023 counteroffensive effort and Ukraine's ability to defend itself in Spring, Summer, and Fall 2024.[61] Delays and hesitation in Western aid only further convince Putin that his theory of victory is valid and embolden Putin to further escalate his war of aggression towards Ukraine and preparations for his future envisioned war against NATO. The West must fulfill its current pledges to Ukraine and proactively arm Ukraine in preparation for future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in 2025 and beyond or face the risk of encouraging Putin's aggressive and expansionist desires and the possible future where those desires turn further westward.

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