

The Kremlin's Pyrrhic Victory in Bakhmut: A Retrospective on the Battle for Bakhmut

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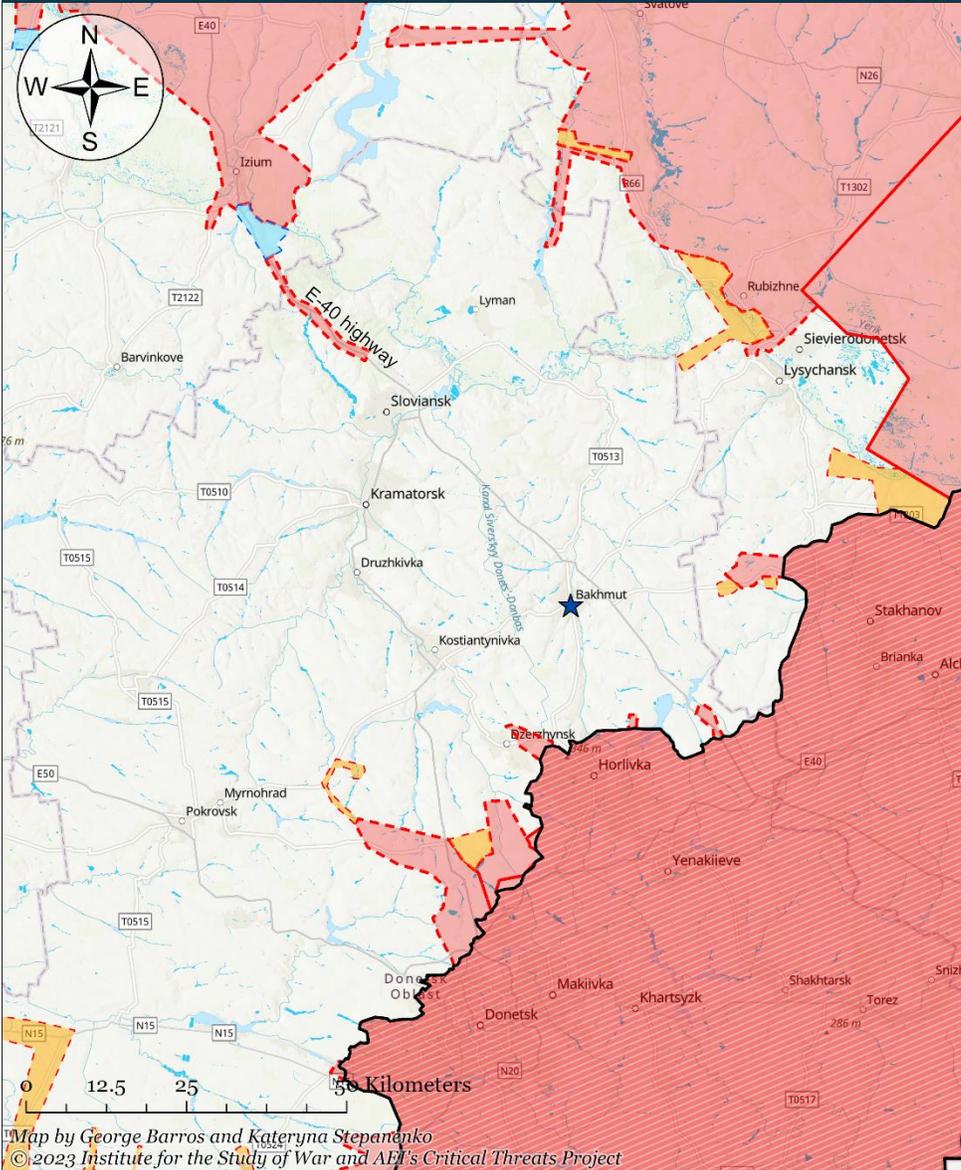
May 24, 2023, 8am EST

Russia declared victory over Bakhmut on May 21, 2023, after fighting for the city for nearly a year.[1] The battle marks the first claimed Russian victory over a large city since the capture of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in the summer of 2022. The Battle for Bakhmut is still ongoing as Ukrainian forces regained the initiative and are counterattacking Bakhmut's flanks north and south of the city. The Russian year-long drive began as part of a theoretically sensible but overly-ambitious operational effort but ended as a purely symbolic gesture that cost tens of thousands of Russian casualties.

The seizure of Bakhmut was originally intended to facilitate Russian offensives to encircle large Ukrainian forces in the east and specifically to take the large and fortified city of Slovyansk from multiple directions. Bakhmut was not a primary Russian objective during the early phases of the war, and the Russian military command aimed to secure Donetsk Oblast's administrative borders by seizing major Ukrainian strongholds such as Slovyansk and Kramatorsk directly. The Ukrainian liberation of most of Kharkiv Oblast in September 2022 ended the immediate Russian threats to Slovyansk and, secondarily, Kramatorsk, whereupon Bakhmut became the main operational and political objective for the Kremlin. Bakhmut fit into the planned Russian winter offensive as one of several lines of advance that were supposed to end by securing the Luhansk and Donetsk oblast boundaries, but all the other attempted advances failed, once more depriving the battle for Bakhmut of hypothetical operational significance by March-April 2023. Moscow stubbornly clung to its efforts to seize Bakhmut regardless of the operational context and ultimately took the destroyed city at a hideous cost in manpower and materiel, then ceding the initiative in the Bakhmut area to Ukraine.[2]

The Russian military command initially sought to seize Bakhmut to support a wide encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Donbas in Spring 2022. Following the Russian withdrawal from Kyiv and the refocusing of Russian military efforts in the east in April 2022 the Russian military command aimed to encircle a large group of Ukrainian forces in western Luhansk and eastern Donetsk oblasts.[3] The Russian military command sought to conduct three simultaneous maneuvers that would collectively surround and seize the Slovyansk stronghold: a westward push through Severodonetsk-Lysychansk, a drive south from Izyum (southeastern Kharkiv Oblast), and an attack north from Bakhmut. The Russian military command sought to secure and advance along the E40 highway - which connects Izyum, Slovyansk, and the Bakhmut area - to quickly encircle Ukrainian forces in eastern Donetsk Oblast and advance towards the region's western borders.[4] The Russian seizure of Bakhmut was a necessary but not sufficient condition for this massive encirclement to succeed. Russian forces captured Izyum in early April 2022 and the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk area in late June and early July 2022, and began launching localized attacks southeast and east of Bakhmut in May 2022.[5] ISW assessed at the time that Russian forces were unlikely to complete this wide encirclement as Russian forces would be unable to advance far enough or quickly enough to accomplish it, an assessment that proved accurate.[6]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of April 1, 2022



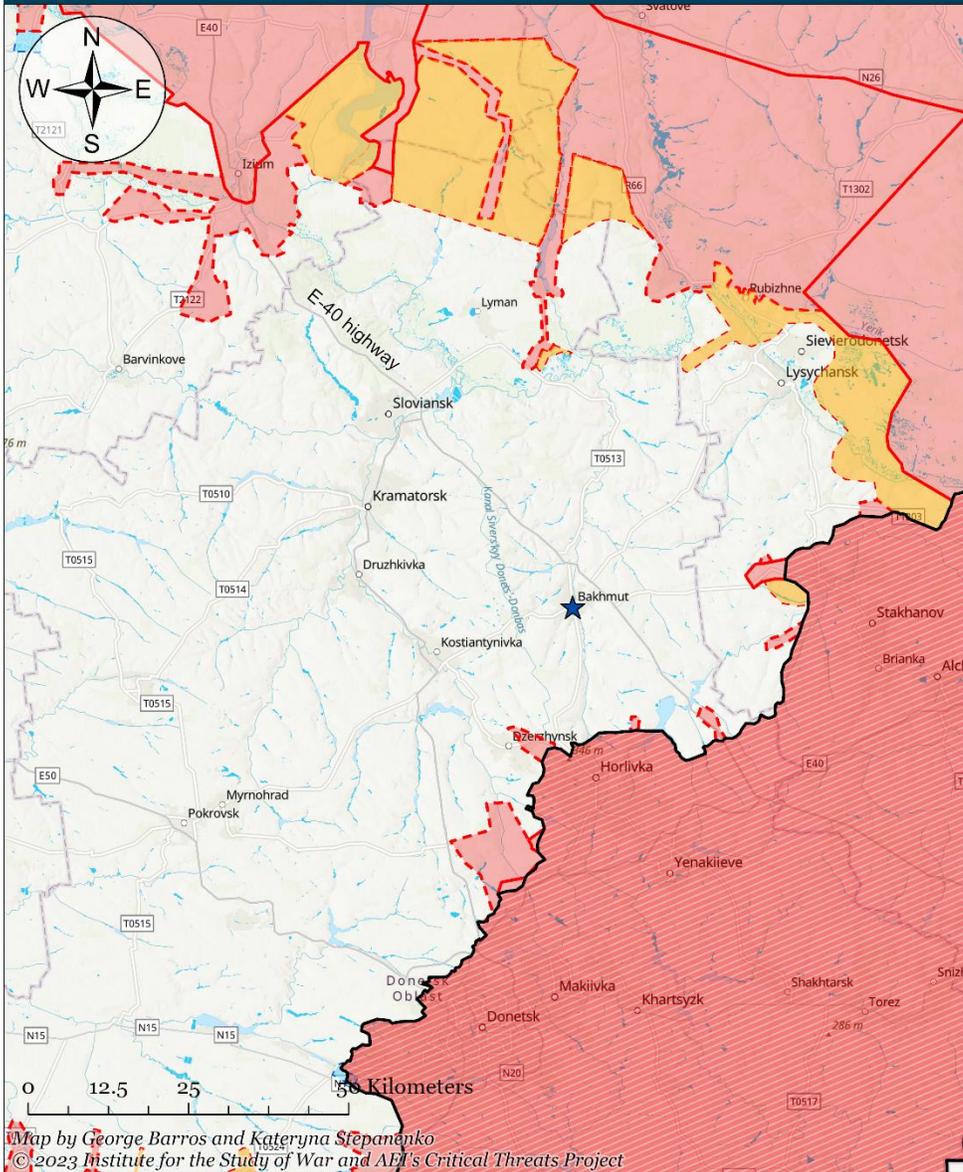
- ▭ Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- ▭ Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- ▭ Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine *
- ▭ Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- ▭ Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

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

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

Russian offensive operations in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk proved extremely costly and slow, consuming a high proportion of Russian offensive capabilities in Donbas. This forced the Russian military command to deprioritize the wide encirclement in Donetsk Oblast in order to complete the seizure of those two cities. The grinding offensives on the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk line forced the Russian military command to deprioritize the objective of completing a wide encirclement of Ukrainian forces along the E40 highway.[7] Wagner forces alongside Chechen and regular Russian units operated in Popasna (about 26km from Bakhmut) and made occasional westward advances towards Bakhmut, but mainly prioritized the capture of Luhansk Oblast.[8] ISW assessed that the Russian attack on Slovyansk from Izyum culminated in mid-May 2022, and Russian forces likely started to prioritize attacks closer to the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk line.[9] Russian forces also abandoned some of their positions in Kharkiv City's immediate vicinity to reinforce the attritional urban attacks in Severodonetsk and Lysychansk.[10]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of May 1, 2022



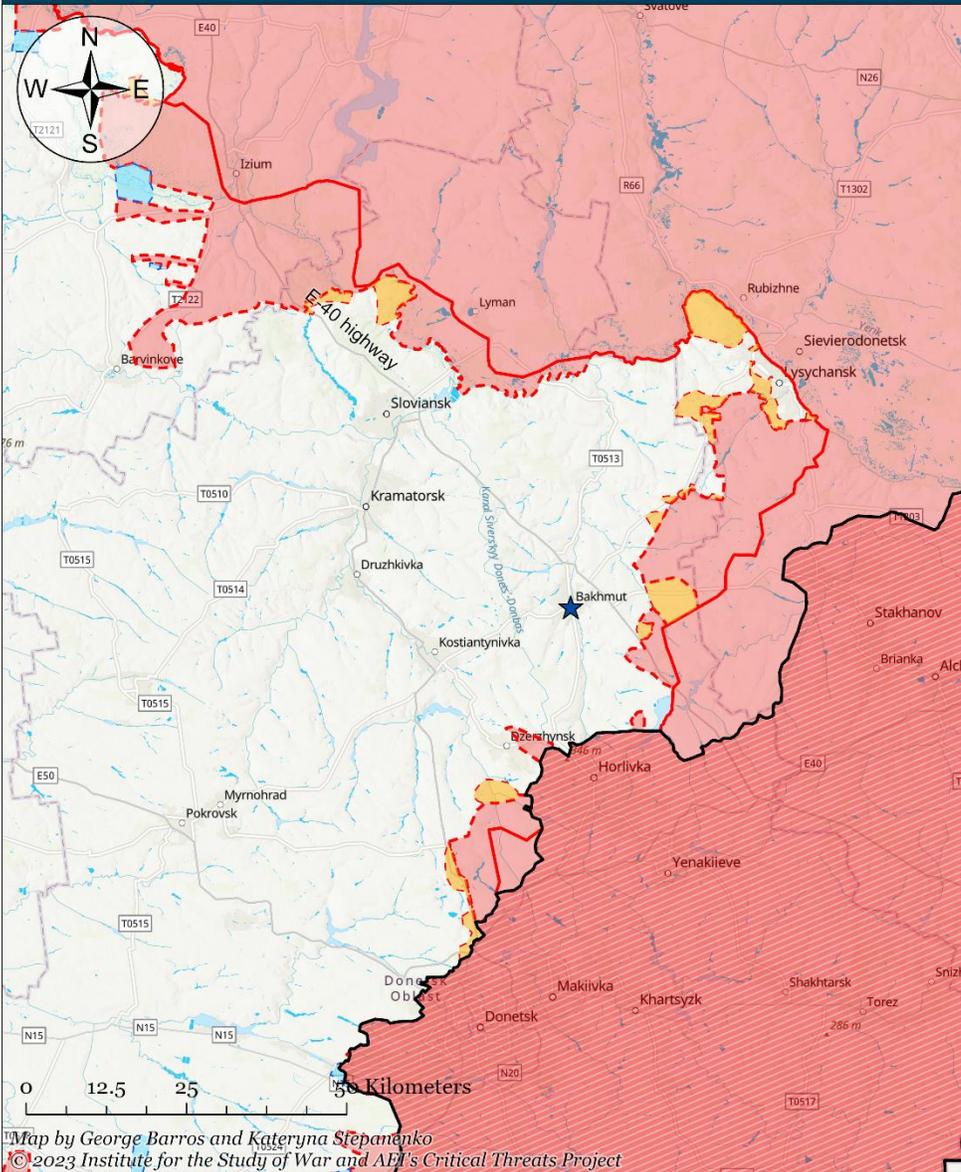
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Russia reprioritized the Battle for Bakhmut in July-August 2022, following the culmination of Russian attacks on the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk line. Wagner forces began localized assaults around settlements east and southeast of Bakhmut, using Popasna and previously Russian occupied territories as springboards for further operations.[11] The Wagner Group also began to expand its forces by recruiting convicts, likely after Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin promised Putin to maintain offensive operations during the period when Russian regular forces were unable to pursue further offensive operations across the theater.[12] It is possible that the Russian military command hoped to eventually resume the drive to the E40 highway after recruiting volunteers to compensate for dwindling reserves. Russian forces still held positions in the Izyum - Lyman area, which made an advance from north and south along the E40 to secure Slovyansk theoretically possible if highly unlikely due to Russia's force composition and degraded offensive capabilities.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of July 1, 2022



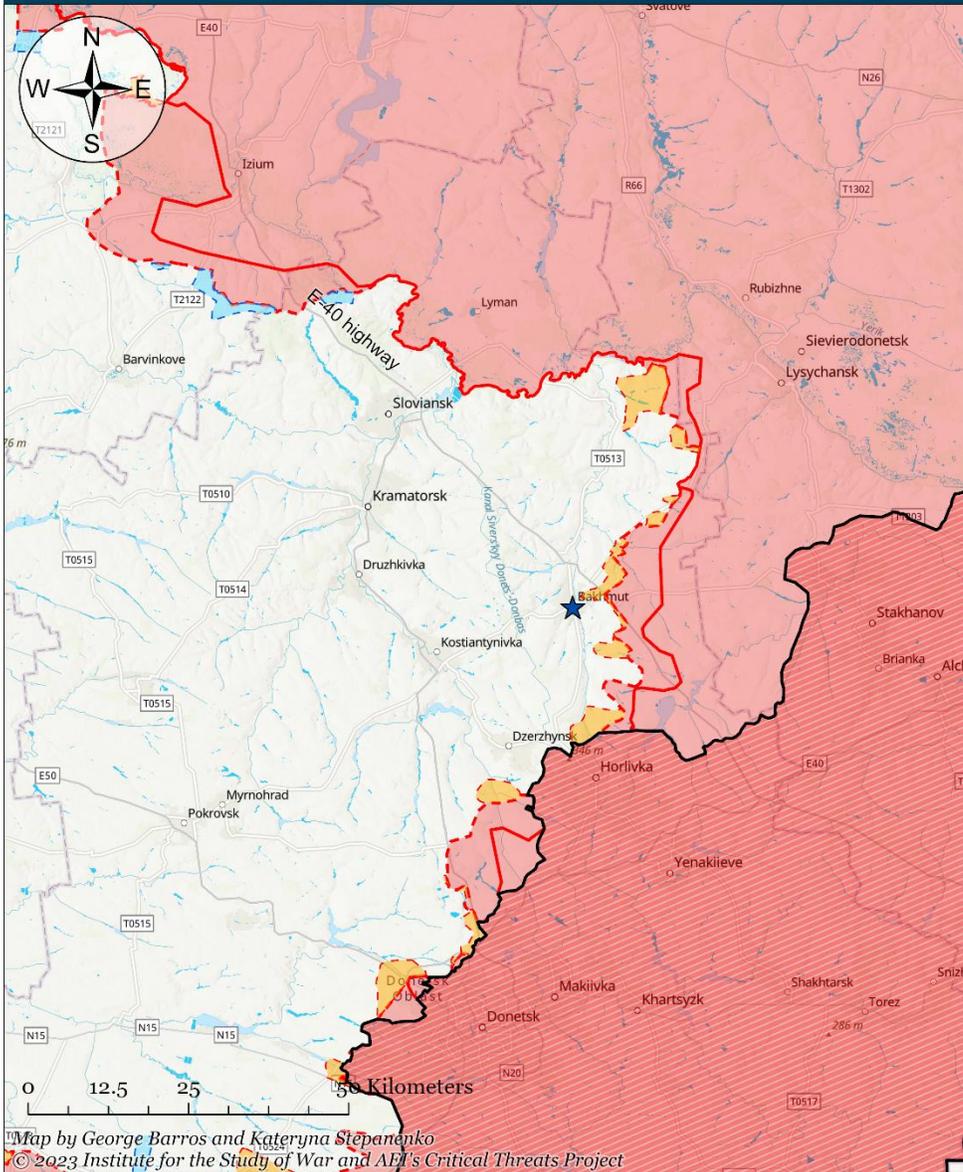
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The successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv Oblast in September 2022 that liberated Izyum ended the prospect of a wide encirclement of Ukrainian forces in the east, thus depriving the attacks on Bakhmut of operational significance. Ukrainian forces liberated Izyum on September 10-11.[13] The loss of Izyum meant that Russian forces no longer threatened Ukrainian defenders in Slovyansk and could no longer hope to conduct a multi-directional offensive from Bakhmut, Izyum, and the east.[14] ISW assessed on September 11 that the loss of Izyum doomed the initial Russian campaign plan to attack Slovyansk from multiple directions and that even the seizure of Bakhmut would “no longer support any larger effort to accomplish the original objectives of this phase of the campaign since it would not be supported by an advance from Izyum in the north.”[15] ISW also assessed that Russian offensive operations against Bakhmut and around Donetsk City have “lost any real operational significance for Moscow and merely waste some of [Russia’s] extremely limited effective combat power.”

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of September 1, 2022



- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine *
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

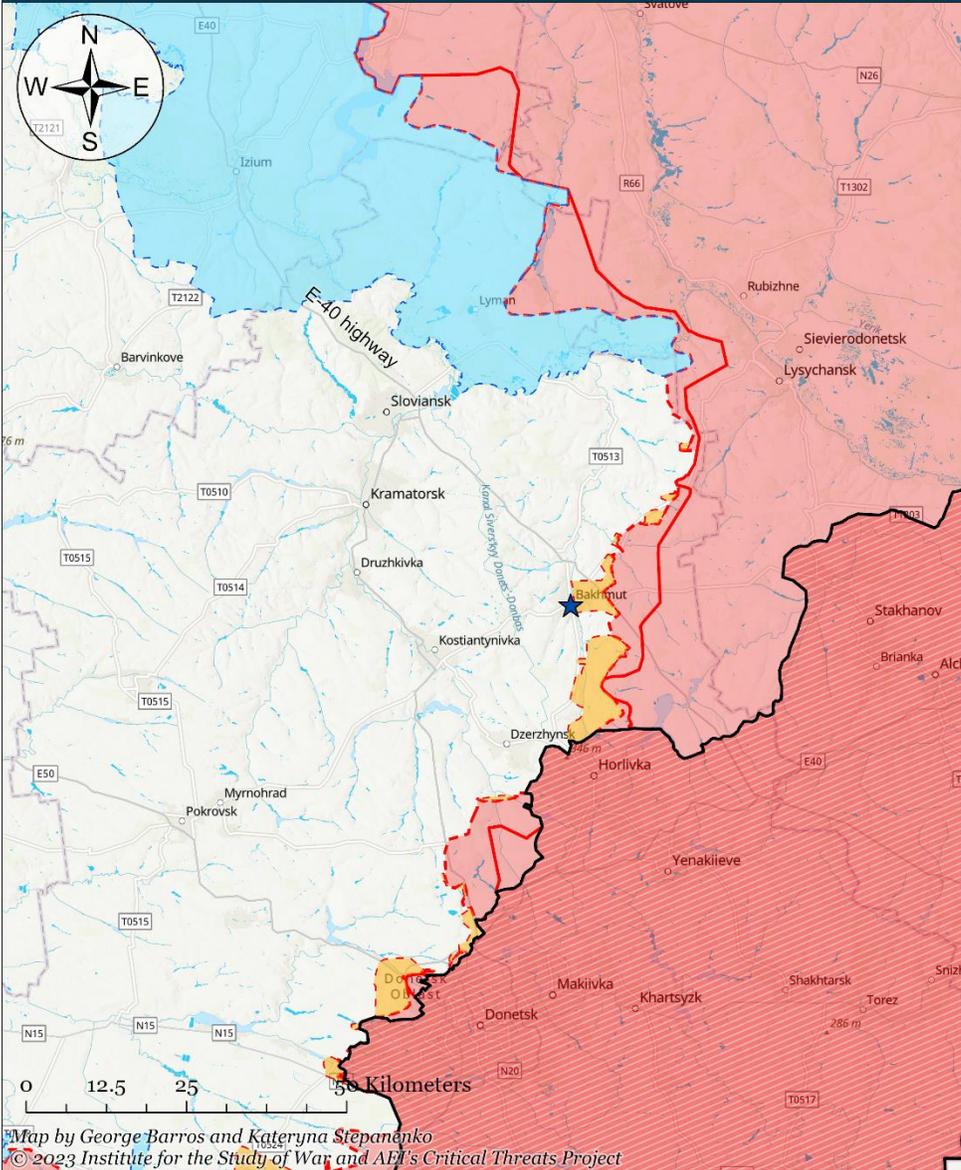
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Wagner mercenaries nevertheless intensified their offensives on Bakhmut and fully committed to the Battle for Bakhmut in Fall 2022 likely to achieve informational and political rather than operational objectives. The Kremlin desperately needed any battlefield victory as Russian forces suffered a great military defeat in Kharkiv Oblast in September and in Lyman (about 43km north of Bakhmut) on October 1.[16] Putin had also faced significant backlash after declaring partial mobilization on September 21 and likely allowed Prigozhin to initiate the Wagner offensive on Bakhmut at least partly in response.[17] Prigozhin himself likely sought to capture Bakhmut in a timely manner in order to convince Putin to promote Wagner-affiliated officials within the Russian military command. Wagner forces began to intensify their offensives northeast, south, and southeast of Bakhmut following the appointment of Wagner-affiliated Army General Sergei Surovikin as the theater commander on October 8.[18] Prigozhin later claimed that he and Surovikin began operation “Bakhmut meatgrinder” to pin Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut shortly after Surovikin’s appointment.[19] The purpose of the efforts to pin Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut in Fall 2022 were unclear—there were no other significant Russian offensives underway, and Ukrainian counteroffensives culminated with the liberation of western Kherson Oblast.

Wagner mercenaries shifted their approach to seizing Bakhmut to a focus on encircling and trapping Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut City by expending a high proportion of their estimated 40,000 prisoner recruits in deadly human wave attacks.[20] At least 22,000 prisoners disappeared from Russian prisons between October and November 2022 alone - likely as a result of Wagner’s prisoner recruitment efforts.[21] A Russian opposition outlet concluded that 55 percent of the total reported Wagner fatalities in October occurred just on October 24 and October 27 – when Ukrainian forces resisted Wagner assaults on the eastern outskirts of the city.[22] The outlet concluded that the number of social media reports commemorating Wagner servicemen increased by more than 2.5 times as they were committed to suicidal drives on Bakhmut’s immediate outskirts.[23]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of October 1, 2022

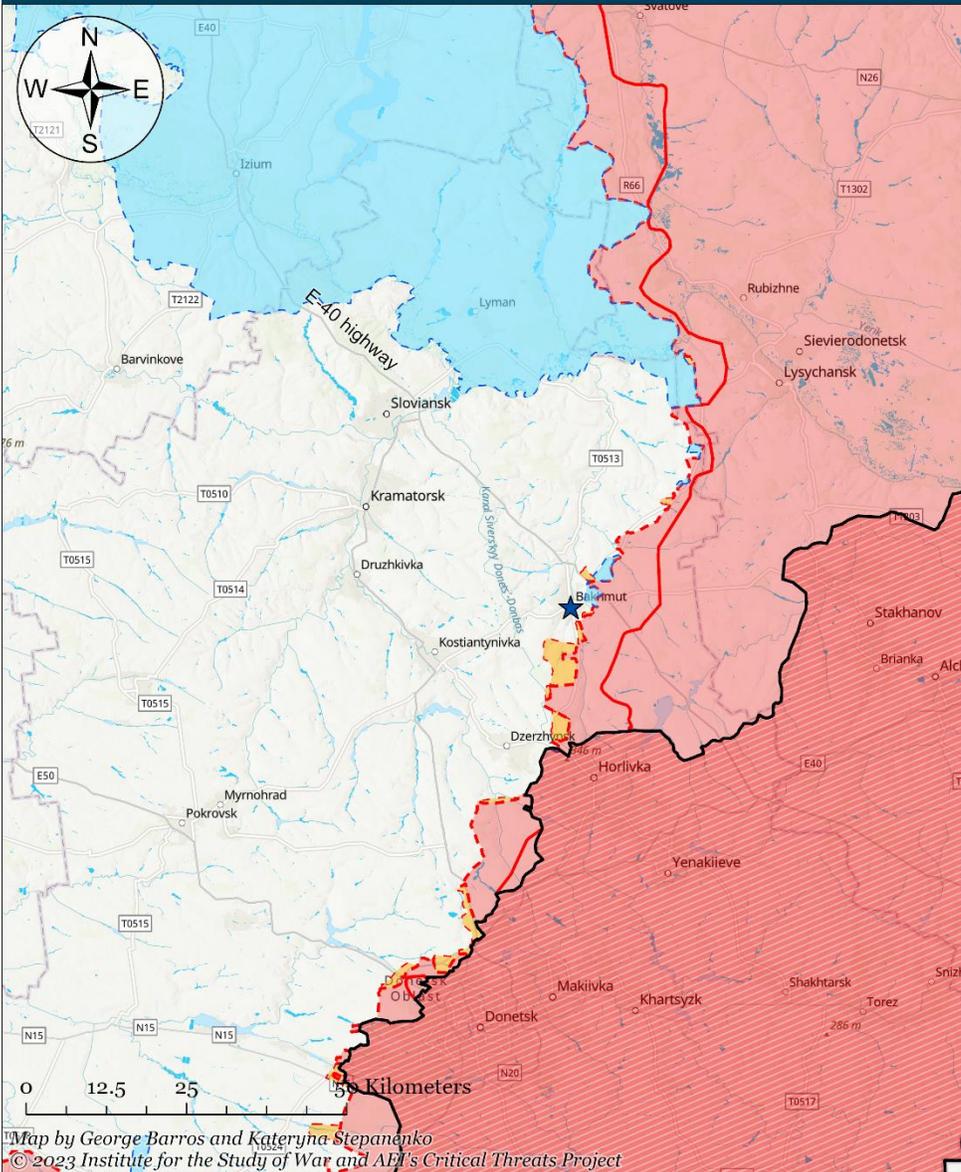


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The Russian MoD began to prepare for its own winter offensive operation in December 2022 and likely began to deprioritize support for Wagner forces at that time. The Russian MoD banned Wagner forces from recruiting prisoners in early January and began to conserve mobilized personnel and military equipment ahead of the planned offensive operation in Luhansk Oblast.[24] Ukrainian intelligence officials reported that Russian forces decreased their use of artillery shells from 60,000 per day to 19,000-20,000.[25] ISW assessed on December 31 that ammunition shortages would slow the pace of Russian offensives.[26] Wagner relies on the Russian MoD to provide ammunition and supplies. The decrease in such ammunition provisions indicates that the Russian MoD likely assessed that it needed more ammunition to launch another offensive operation in the theater and that the Wagner effort against Bakhmut was not a primary mission. The Russian regular forces were ultimately unsuccessful in achieving the goal of capturing Donbas over the winter, confirming that Russian forces did not have sufficient offensive capabilities to maintain a multi-pronged offensive in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.[27] The fight for Bakhmut could have regained operational significance as part of the general Russian winter offensive had any of the other drives been successful. As it was, the total failure of all the other offensive efforts during the winter offensive operation meant that Bakhmut remained primarily an informational and political rather than operationally significant objective for Russian forces.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of December 1, 2022



Map by George Barros and Kateryna Stepanenko
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- ▭ Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- ▭ Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- ▭ Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine *
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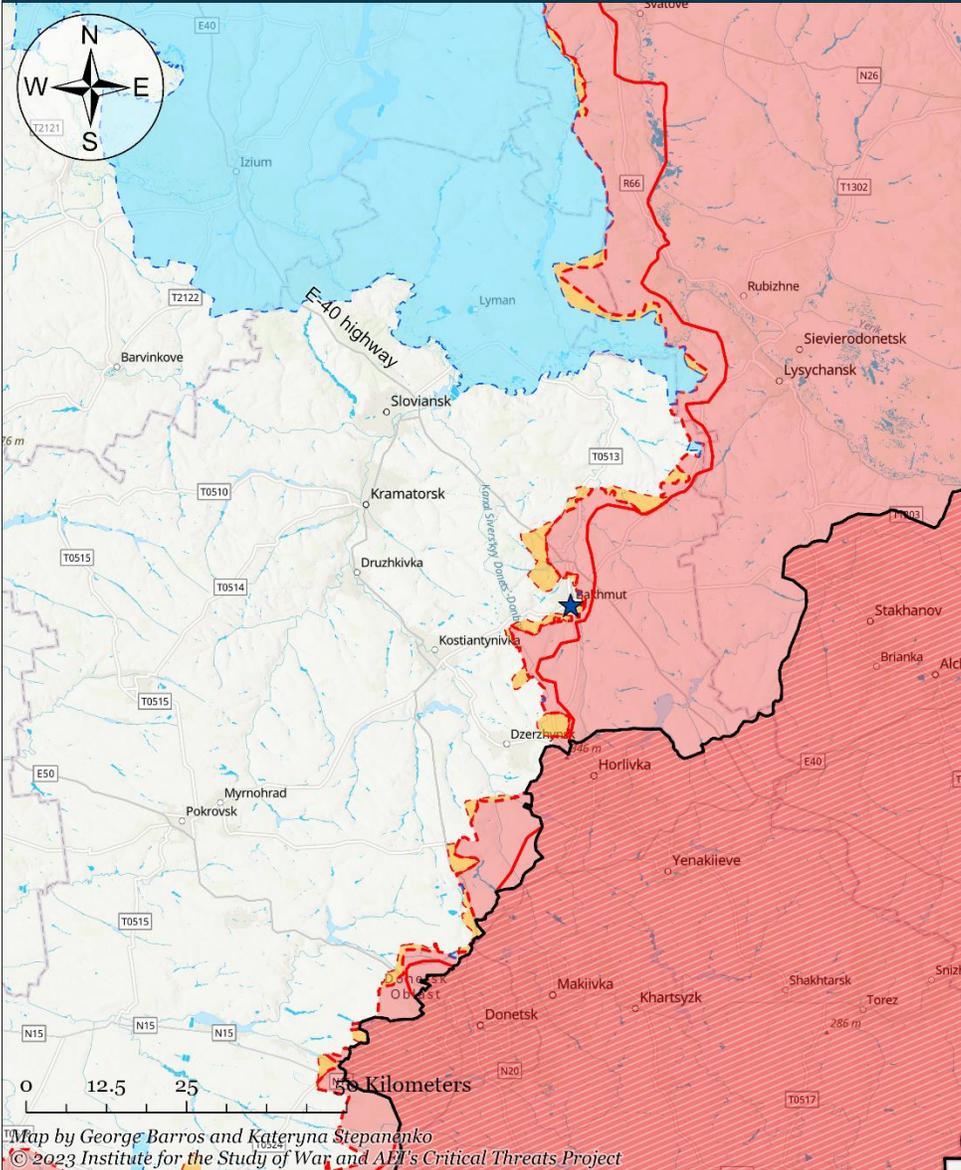
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Wagner’s highly attritional offensives began to show signs of culmination by late December 2022 and in January 2023. US military doctrine defines culmination as the “point at which a force no longer has the capability to continue its form of operations, offensive or defensive,” and when “a force cannot continue the attack and must assume a defensive posture or execute an operational pause.”[28] A force can continue operations after culmination but normally in a badly degraded condition. The rate of Wagner forces’ advance slowed, and Ukrainian forces were able to push back Russian forces from some eastern outskirts of Bakhmut City.[29] ISW also observed that Wagner forces made slightly fewer overall advances in the Bakhmut area in November and December 2022 combined as compared to the month of October.[30] Wagner forces likely needed to initiate a tactical or operational pause in late December 2022 and early January 2023 as they started to face heavy losses in the Bakhmut area and ammunition shortages but continued to make advances in eastern outskirts of Bakhmut.[31] A Russian opposition outlet estimated that Wagner fatalities increased by an additional 2.5 times in December, and US officials noted that at least 1,000 Wagner mercenaries were killed in action in December.[32] The Russian MoD - which has been feuding with Prigozhin and attempting to compete with him for Putin’s favor - had likely seen Wagner’s slowing pace as an opportunity to regain control over the Bakhmut direction and advance to Soledar (about 12km northeast of Bakhmut).[33] The introduction of Russian regular forces on Bakhmut’s flanks likely temporarily offset the culmination of the Wagner Group’s offensive by allowing Wagner forces to concentrate in the city and retain the initiative in the urban fighting.[34] ISW assessed as early as January 31 that Russian forces were unlikely to complete the encirclement of Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut, however.[35]

The Wagner Group began committing its remaining forces to Bakhmut between February and March to threaten Ukrainian forces into withdrawing from the city so as to avoid having to fight through it. Wagner casualties reportedly decreased by 35 percent in February when compared to January, likely because Wagner expended much of its convict recruits personnel when fighting for Bakhmut the previous month.[36] The limited introduction of regular artillery forces to Bakhmut’s flanks may also have contributed to the decrease of Wagner casualties. Prigozhin later admitted to receiving assistance from artillery and infantry units belonging to the Eastern Military District.[37] Wagner, however, lost its main source of rapid recruitment and began to commit its elite units to sustain the advance.[38] Geolocated footage showed 43 buses full of well-dressed and high-spirited Wagner personnel moving from Crimea to an unspecified location via Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast on February 18.[39] These personnel and other Wagner forces likely arrived in Bakhmut to reinforce Wagner forces as Ukrainian military officials reported that Wagner was using its combat-ready assault units in attacks on northern Bakhmut City in late February.[40] Wagner forces also likely prioritized maneuvers northeast and south of Bakhmut in an effort to sever Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs) west of Bakhmut and threaten to encircle Ukrainian forces in the city.[41] Prigozhin, who was likely aware that he was running out of uncommitted personnel, likely hoped to scare Ukrainian forces into withdrawing from Bakhmut and used additional forces to threaten envelopment or encirclement. Prigozhin even offered Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky an opportunity to withdraw Ukrainian forces from Bakhmut on March 3 and claimed that Wagner mercenaries had practically encircled Ukrainian forces in the city after Wagner achieved some breakthroughs in eastern, northern, and southern Bakhmut.[42]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of March 1, 2023



- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine *
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

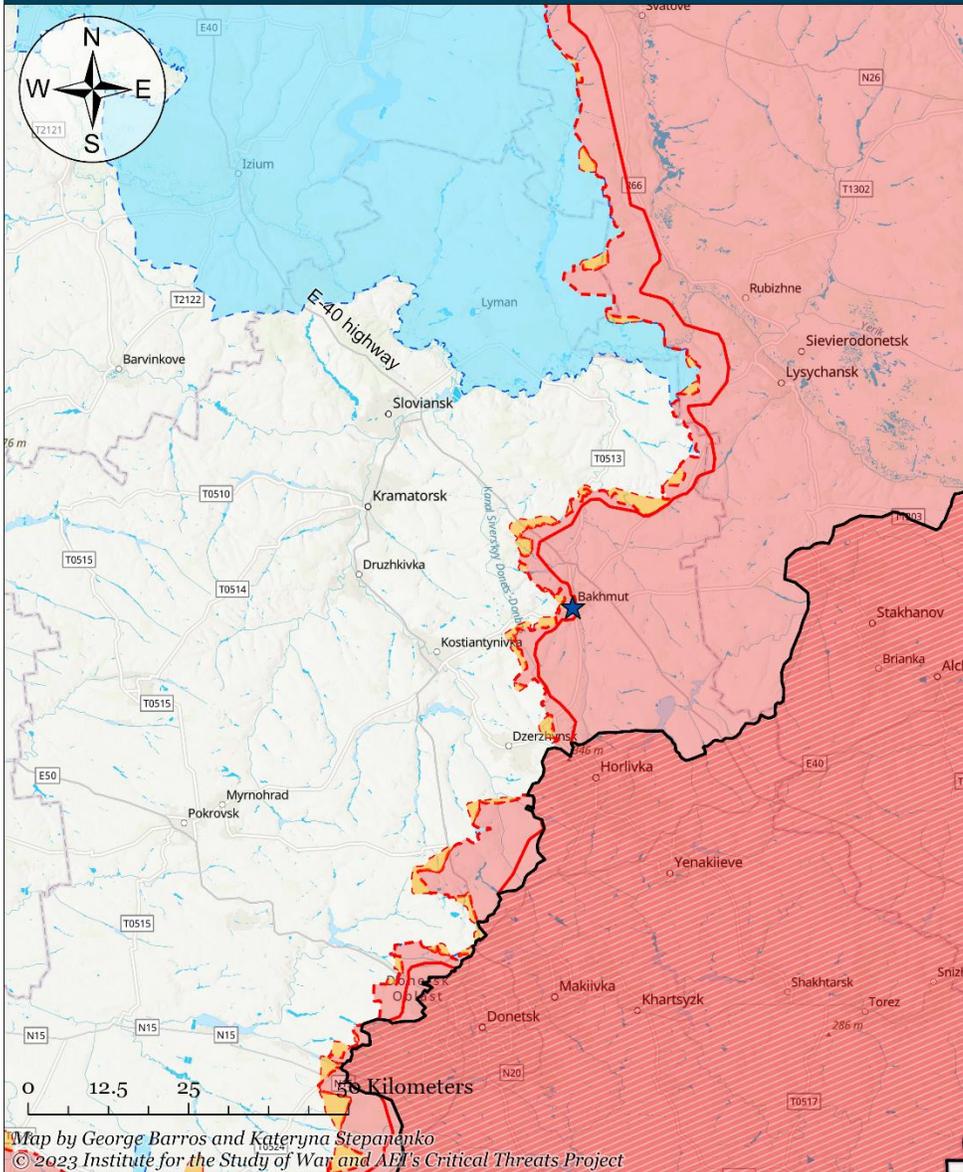
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The Ukrainian military blocked the Russian efforts to envelop or encircle Bakhmut in March, forcing Wagner forces to fight through the city and suffer significant losses for the next two months. Ukrainian forces conducted a series of controlled withdrawals and gradually stabilized the battlefield geometry in Bakhmut, eliminating the threat of encirclement or envelopment.[43] The pace of Russian advances north and south of Bakhmut decreased, and Russian forces were unable to physically interdict Ukrainian GLOCs despite claiming “fire control” over the two highways into the city.[44] Ukrainian military officials even observed on March 15 that Wagner attacks had markedly decreased in and around Bakhmut – just two weeks after Prigozhin announced that Wagner forces would imminently encircle Ukrainian forces.[45] Wagner’s pace likely decreased as a result of high-intensity urban combat in Bakhmut City, and Wagner was unable to maintain the same momentum it had had in February and early March. Wagner forces also began releasing convicts who had signed six-month contracts with Wagner, which likely further depleted Wagner personnel and slowed the pace of advance.[46]

ISW assessed that the Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut was a strategically sound decision as Ukrainians would benefit from exhausting Wagner forces if they were able to retain control over the two GLOCs west of Bakhmut.[47] ISW also argued that while Bakhmut is not intrinsically significant operationally or strategically for Ukrainian forces to maintain, the defense of Bakhmut became more strategically significant as Russian forces decided to commit Wagner elements, Russian airborne troops (VDV), and other lower-quality troops to the fight.[48] US Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff General Mark Milley reported on March 29 that the Wagner Group had around 6,000 professional personnel and 20,000 to 30,000 remaining recruits and convicts in the Bakhmut area.[49] The Ukrainian defense of the city – despite high Ukrainian costs – exhausted and inflicted significant casualties on Russian personnel that otherwise could have reinforced other directions ahead planned Ukrainian counteroffensives. US President Joe Biden stated on May 21 that Russian forces have suffered 100,000 casualties while fighting for Bakhmut, and White House national security spokesperson John Kirby stated that an estimated 10,000 Wagner servicemen have been killed since December 2022.[50]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of May 1, 2023



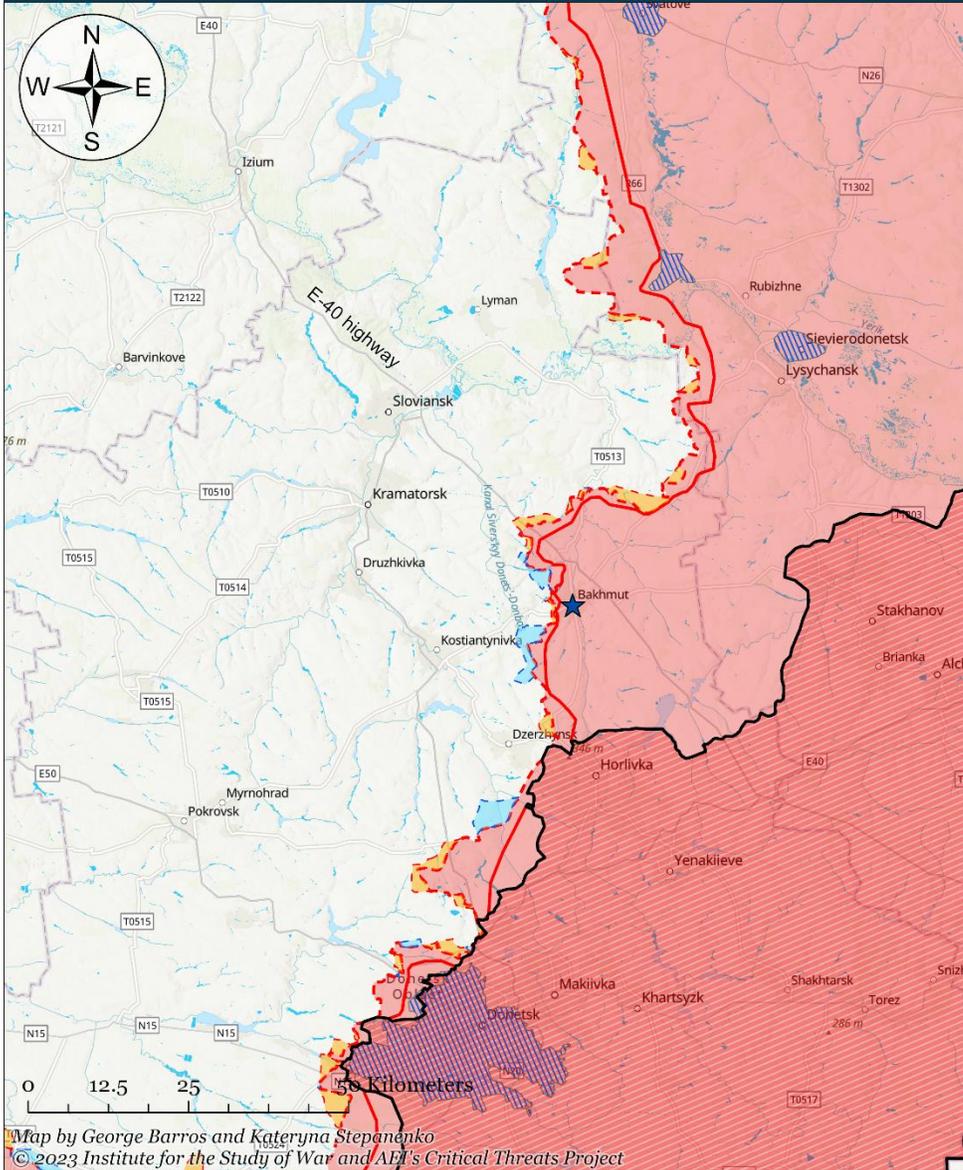
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Prigozhin has likely signaled the culmination of Wagner forces in declaring victory in Bakhmut on May 20 and announcing Wagner’s withdrawal from the city and plans to reconstitute on May 25, despite subsequent denials.[51] Prigozhin claimed on May 22 that Wagner forces did not advance or attempt to seize any new territories on May 21 and reiterated that Wagner will hand over the responsibility for Bakhmut City to Russian MoD on May 25.[52] Prigozhin also announced that all Wagner servicemen will leave the frontlines in Ukraine by June 1 to reconstitute and train.[53] It is unclear if Prigozhin will fully withdraw his forces from Bakhmut at this time, but it is highly likely that Wagner forces must initiate a long-needed operational pause. Prigozhin denied on May 23 that his forces are exhausted and claimed that Wagner recruits 10,000 forces per month in a response to ISW’s assessment of the likely exhaustion of his forces in Bakhmut.[54] Prigozhin additionally refused to specify whether Wagner forces will soon restart offensive operations elsewhere. Prigozhin’s announced intention to withdraw his forces from the frontlines and give them two months to reconstitute likely indicates that Prigozhin assesses that his forces have been exhausted in combat, his denials notwithstanding.[55] Prigozhin had also been setting information conditions for months signaling that Wagner would not be able to continue to advance after capturing Bakhmut while observing that the Russian seizure of all of Donetsk Oblast will require years of combat.[56] ISW assessed on March 5 that “the Russian offensive in Bakhmut will likely culminate whether Russian forces capture the city or not, and the Russian military will struggle to maintain any subsequent offensive operations for some months.”[57] Prigozhin also acknowledged on May 18 that Wagner forces failed to encircle Ukrainian forces in Bakhmut – a goal that had been part of the supposed “Bakhmut meatgrinder” operation that his forces have been pursuing since Fall 2022 and Winter 2023.[58]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk Oblast as of May 22, 2023



- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine *
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

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The Wagner Group’s announced two-month reconstitution period could have Wagner forces sitting out key parts of the Ukrainian counteroffensive depending on when and how it begins.[59] US defense officials previously expressed concerns that the Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut would undermine Ukrainian counteroffensive plans and urged Ukrainian forces to deprioritize the defense of Bakhmut.[60] ISW assessed on March 5 that “Ukrainian forces will likely have a window of opportunity to seize the battlefield initiative and launch a counteroffensive when the Russian effort around Bakhmut culminates either before or after taking the city.”[61] Wagner forces are unlikely to successfully conduct a controlled withdrawal from Bakhmut while in contact with Ukrainian forces within the next two days without disrupting the Russian MoD’s efforts to prepare for planned Ukrainian counteroffensives.[62] Conducting a relief-in-place while in contact is an extremely challenging maneuver that Russian forces would likely struggle to conduct even if the Russian MoD agrees to undertake it. Russian forces continue to transfer airborne, motorized rifle, and special forces elements to reinforce the Bakhmut flanks and these additional forces could in principle participate in Wagner’s relief-in-place operation.[63] They will not be available to defend against Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in other sectors of the front, however.

The Battle of Bakhmut exposed several key flaws in the Russian planning and conduct of operational maneuver. The Russian military command continued to pursue a relentless assault on Bakhmut after the city lost its original operational significance and failed to adjust its military objectives appropriately. The Kremlin, evidently, chased after any potential victory to generate informational effects and allowed Prigozhin to expend a large amount of Russian ammunition and thousands of prisoner recruits and then more professional forces to maintain a battle of no operational significance in Bakhmut. Prigozhin also continued this battle to gain desired political standing in Russia – likely without the intent to pursue the original goal of conducting a wider encirclement of Donbas. The Kremlin’s fixation with Bakhmut indicates that Russia has not learned lessons from the first phases of the war. The Russian military command continues to overestimate Russian military capabilities and has not mastered time and space relationships in this war at its current level of effectiveness. The Russian military command also continues to pursue ill-informed political objectives at the expense of Russian personnel and resources.

It is not even clear that the Battle of Bakhmut is yet over. Ukrainian forces have been conducting local counterattacks on Bakhmut’s flanks, having regained the initiative following Wagner’s culmination.[64] The decision to allow the battle to end or force it into a new phase now lies with Kyiv. Ukraine thus now has the initiative at every level of war across almost the entire front.

[1] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-21-2023>

[2] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-21-2023>

[3] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-1>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-2>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-12>

- [4] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-11>
- [5] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-24>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-3>
- [6] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-23>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-22>
- [7] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-23> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Operations%20Assessments%20May%202013.pdf>
- [8] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-20>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-22-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-20>
- [9] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-12>
- [10] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-13>
- [11] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-25> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-3>
- [12] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-12-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-26-2023>
- [13] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-10>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-11>
- [14] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-11>
- [15] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-september-11>
- [16] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-1>
- [17] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-9>
- [18] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-9>
- [19] <https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/06/europe/wagner-bakhmut-withdraw-meat-grind-intl-hnk/index.html>
- [20] <https://www.vice.com/en/article/y3pynk/wagner-russia-ukraine-prisons>
- [21] <https://www.yahoo.com/lifestyle/wagner-prigozhin-wants-least-33-161000609.html>
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- [23] <https://verstka dot media/bitva-za-bahmut>
- [24] <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-15-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign->

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