



Donetsk: The Crux of the Matter in the Russo-Ukrainian War

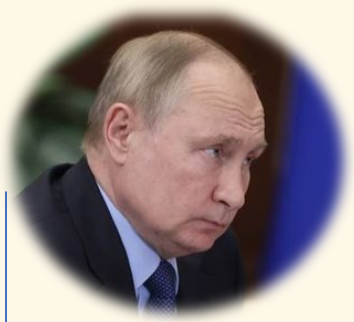
Yu-Shan Wu
22 Sept 2025
NSYSU



The Start



I made the decision to hold a special military operation. Its goal is to protect the people that are subjected to abuse, genocide from the Kiev regime for eight years, and to this end we will seek to demilitarize and denazify Ukraine. February 24, 2022



Ukraine: the red line

специальная военная операция
Special military operation

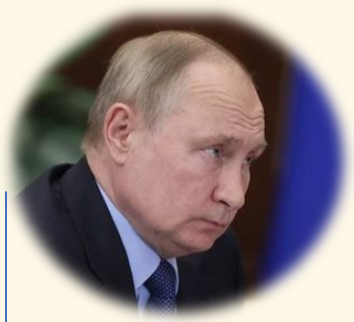
демилитаризация и денацификация

Demilitarization and Denazification:

Derived from allies' policy in occupied Germany after the end of WWII (4D's)

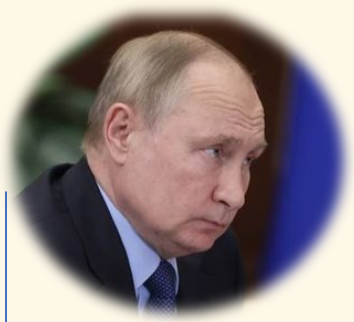
Demilitarization is for Russian security

Denazification is for Russian ethnic/linguistic group rights, or Russian nationalism



Demilitarization

- ❖ Putin: Russia cornered
 - ❖ No Russian leader would accept Ukraine becoming a member of a military alliance targeting Russia
 - ❖ Russia has no way to stop Ukraine from inching towards NATO membership: strategic flirtation in 2008 (NATO summit), 2019 (Ukrainian Constitution), and 2021 (US supporting Kyiv's "Euro-Atlantic aspiration"); training and arming Ukrainian forces by NATO countries
 - ❖ Putin's December 2021 ultimatum flatly rejected by NATO (January 26, 2022)
 - ❖ What if it were the US? (Cuban Crisis 1962)



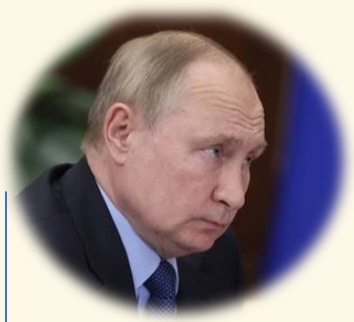
By Feb. 2022

Security Dilemma:

Ukraine will not feel safe unless
admitted to NATO;

Russia will not feel safe if Ukraine is a
NATO member

Security of Russia and Ukraine
zero-sum



By Feb. 2022

Nationalism:

Ukraine has been busy building a new national identity through derussification, while Russia considers its responsibility to support Russians (ethnic and cultural) in Ukraine to fight discrimination

Here Russian and Ukrainian goals are also zero-sum

For Language



Russian: We want to Speak Native Language



Fist fight in Rada for giving Russian official status in the East.
May, 2012



By now the war in
Ukraine has been
going on for

1306 Days

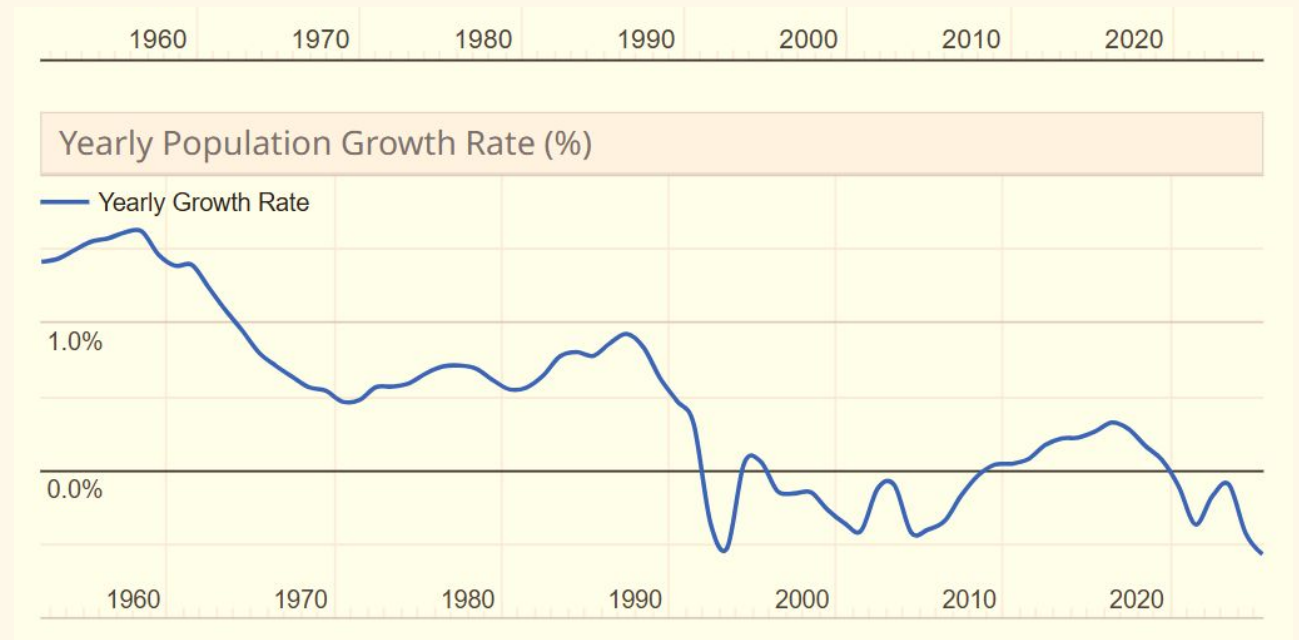
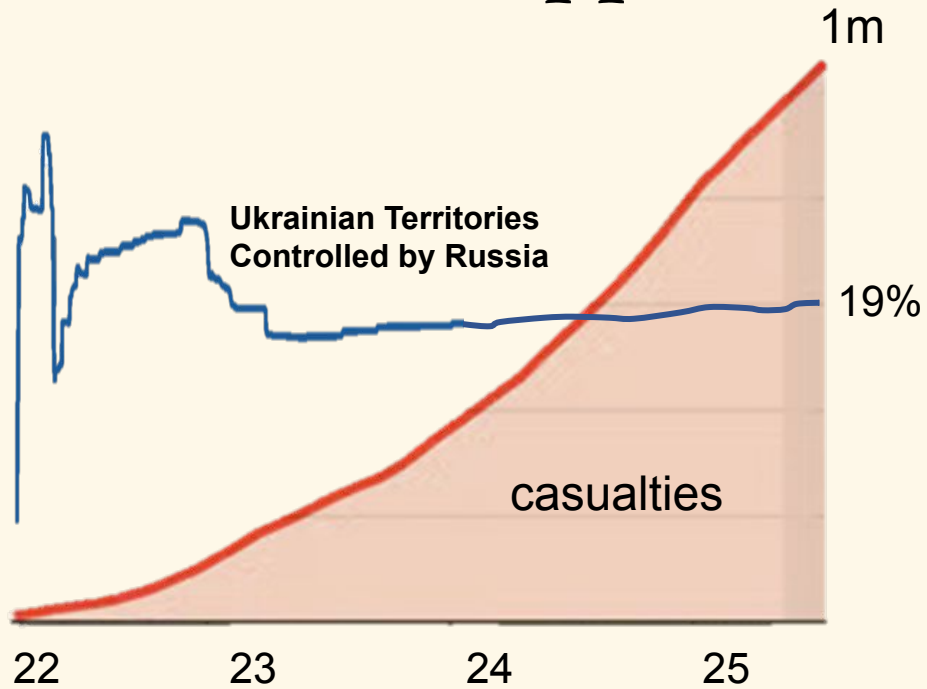
or

3 Years & 7 Months

and counting.....



Why hasn't Putin stopped?



A horizontal band with a vibrant red background featuring fluid, wavy, and draped patterns, resembling silk or satin. The text is centered within this band.

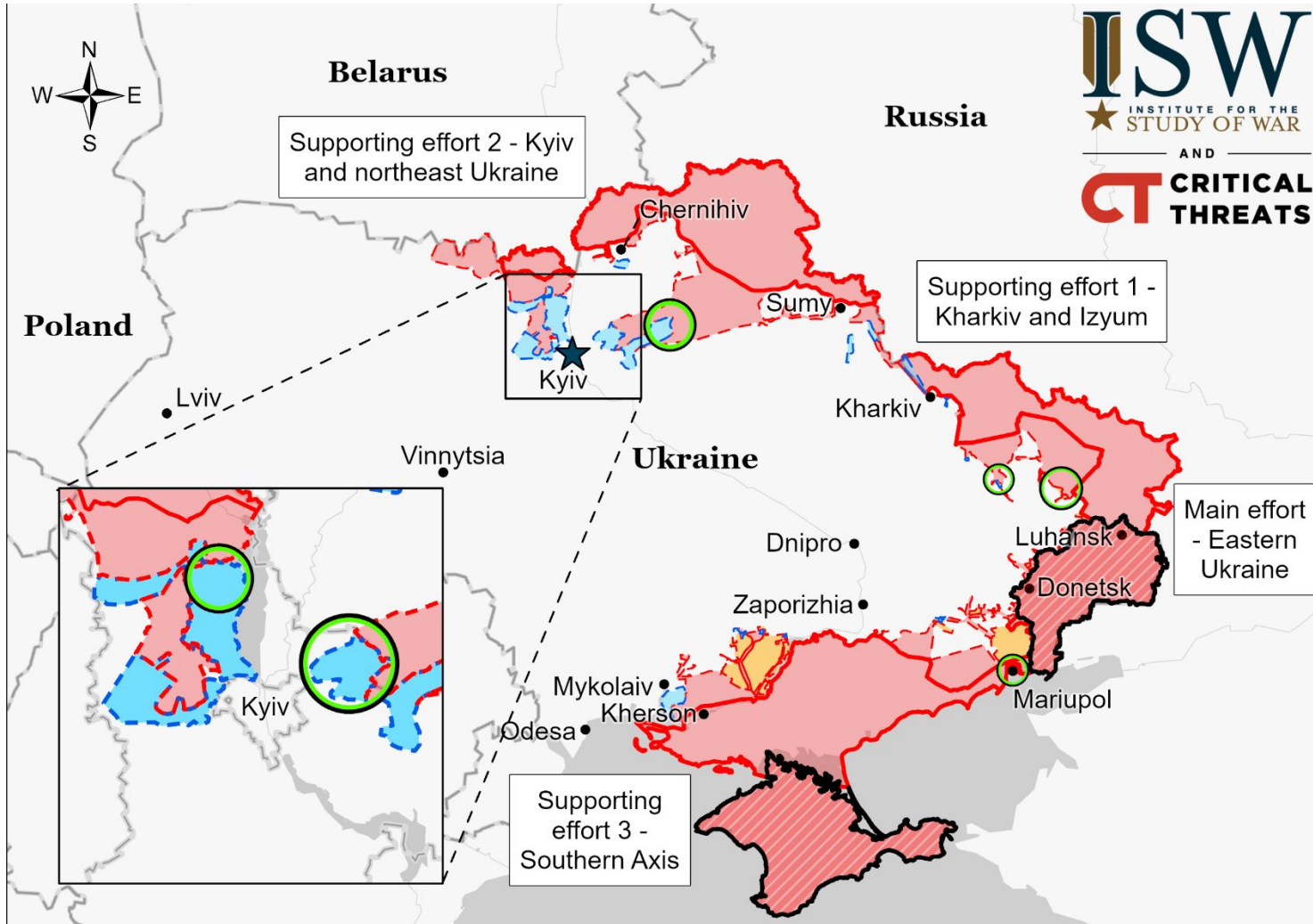
Four-Stage Process

Here comes the strike

Feb 24, 2022



Stagnated Offensive



- The 1st stage: Russian forces moved in from north, east and south fronts, along the whole of the 1,700 km border, making strategic mistakes and tactical blunders
- Insufficient training and logistics. BTGs not working well, tanks not supported by infantry
- Strong resistance by Ukrainian forces, no duel with Russian forces, successful propaganda, Western sympathy and support
- Russians are either stalled, or forced to level the city to occupy it, adding to anti-Russian feelings and global condemnation



2nd Stage: Donbass

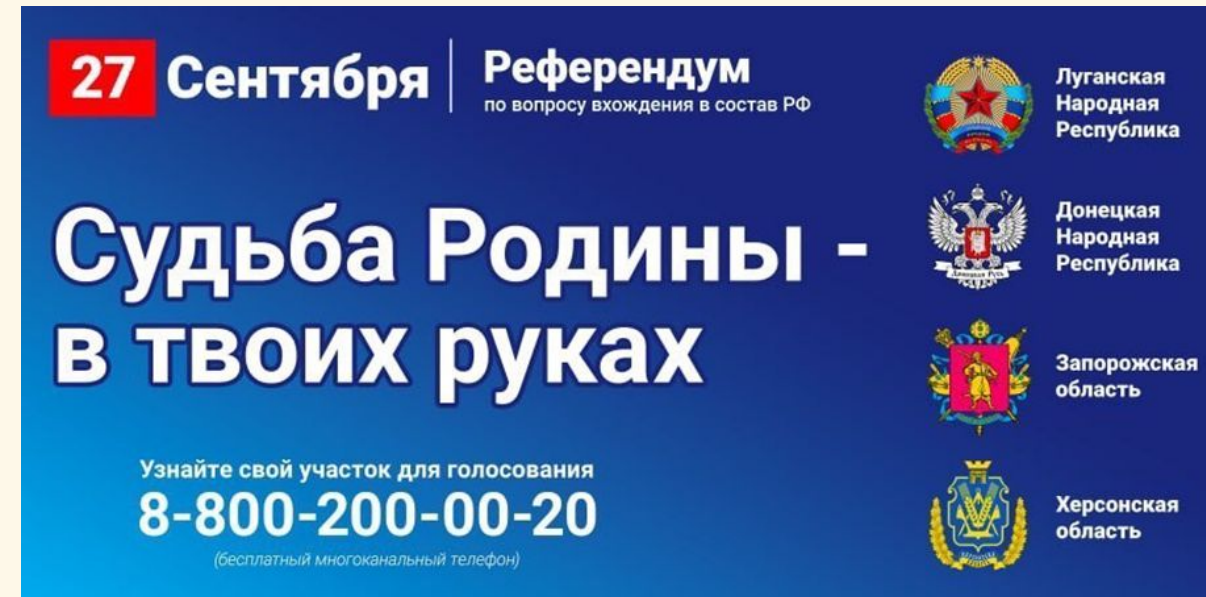
- ❖ Strategic shift from security to nationalism
 - ❖ Demilitarization of Ukraine has failed, Ukraine has essentially become a NATO protectorate
 - ❖ After the Bucha incident, and the sinking of the Black Sea Fleet flagship Moskva in late March and early April, the door to peace was closed, despite Istanbul
 - ❖ Putin focused his goals on the Donbass region to consolidate Russia's control over south eastern Ukraine where one finds the concentration of ethnic Russians and Russian-speaking population. Russia promotes “passportization” and “re-Russification”



3rd Stage: Ukrainian counter offensive I, II

- ❖ Ukraine's two-front counterattack
 - ❖ The Ukrainian army began a counterattack in Kherson on 8/27, drawing Russian elite troops to the south. Through 9/6-17, Ukraine launched an offensive in Kharkiv, recovering more than 8,000 km² of land
 - ❖ 9/21 Russia announced a partial military mobilization, conscripting 300,000 people. 9/23-27 Russia held a referendum in Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk and Zaporizhzhia. 9/30 Russia announced the annexation of the four provinces
 - ❖ Russian troops withdrew from the west bank of the Dnieper River in Kherson Province on 11/9

3rd Stage: Tit for Tat



Новая карта России



Russia: Here to Stay

Moscow's shift from security to nationalistic, land grabbing

Russia's new map after September 2022 referenda

In reality



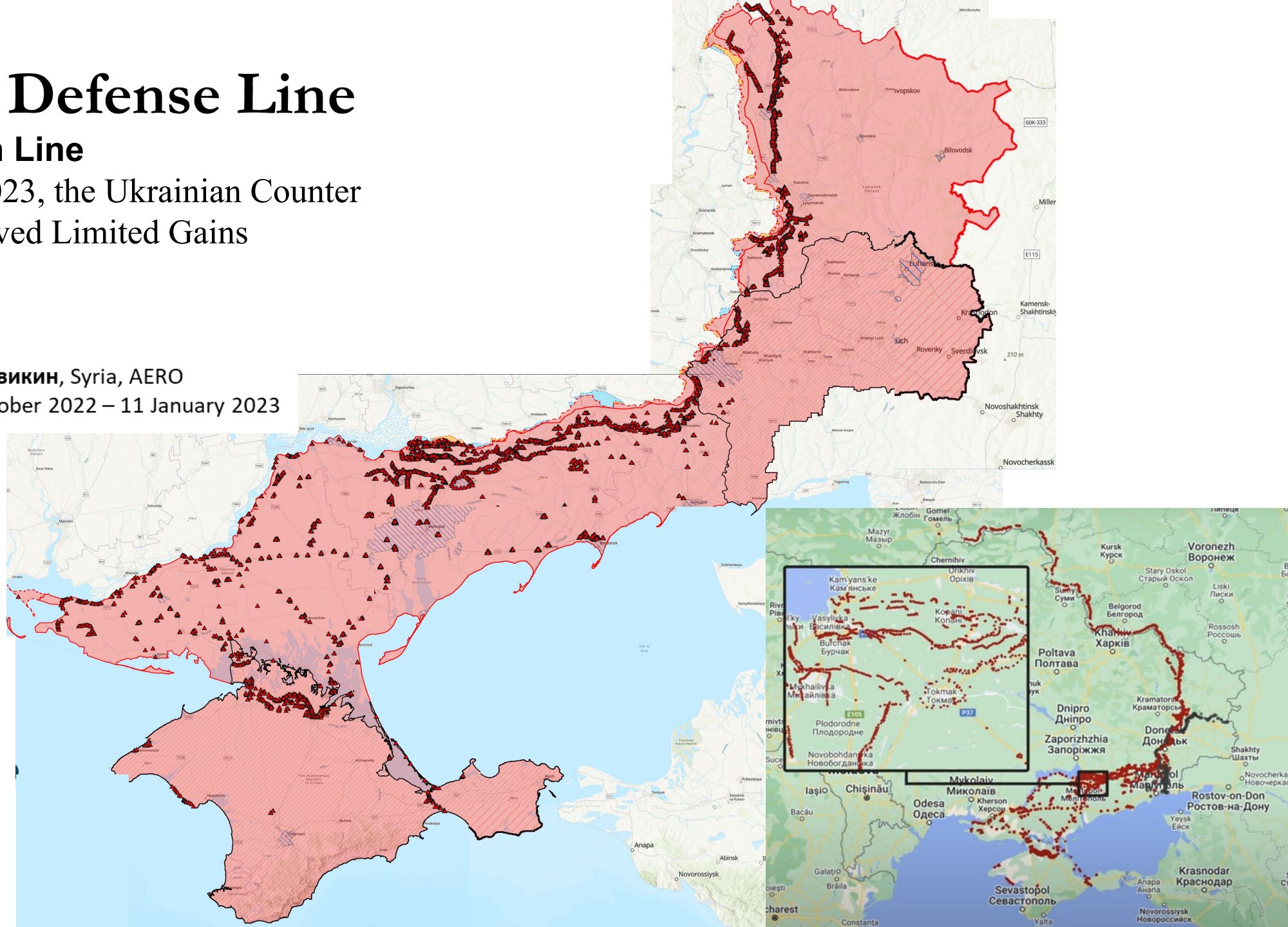
Russia's Defense Line

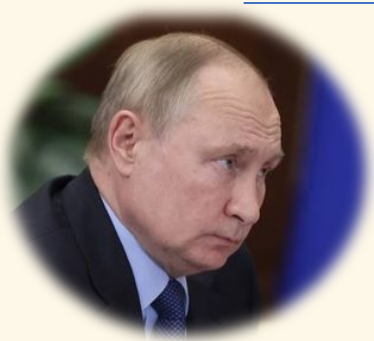
The Surovikin Line

Since June 4, 2023, the Ukrainian Counter Offensive achieved Limited Gains



Суворовикин, Syria, AERO
8 October 2022 – 11 January 2023





4th Stage: Stalemate since end of 2022



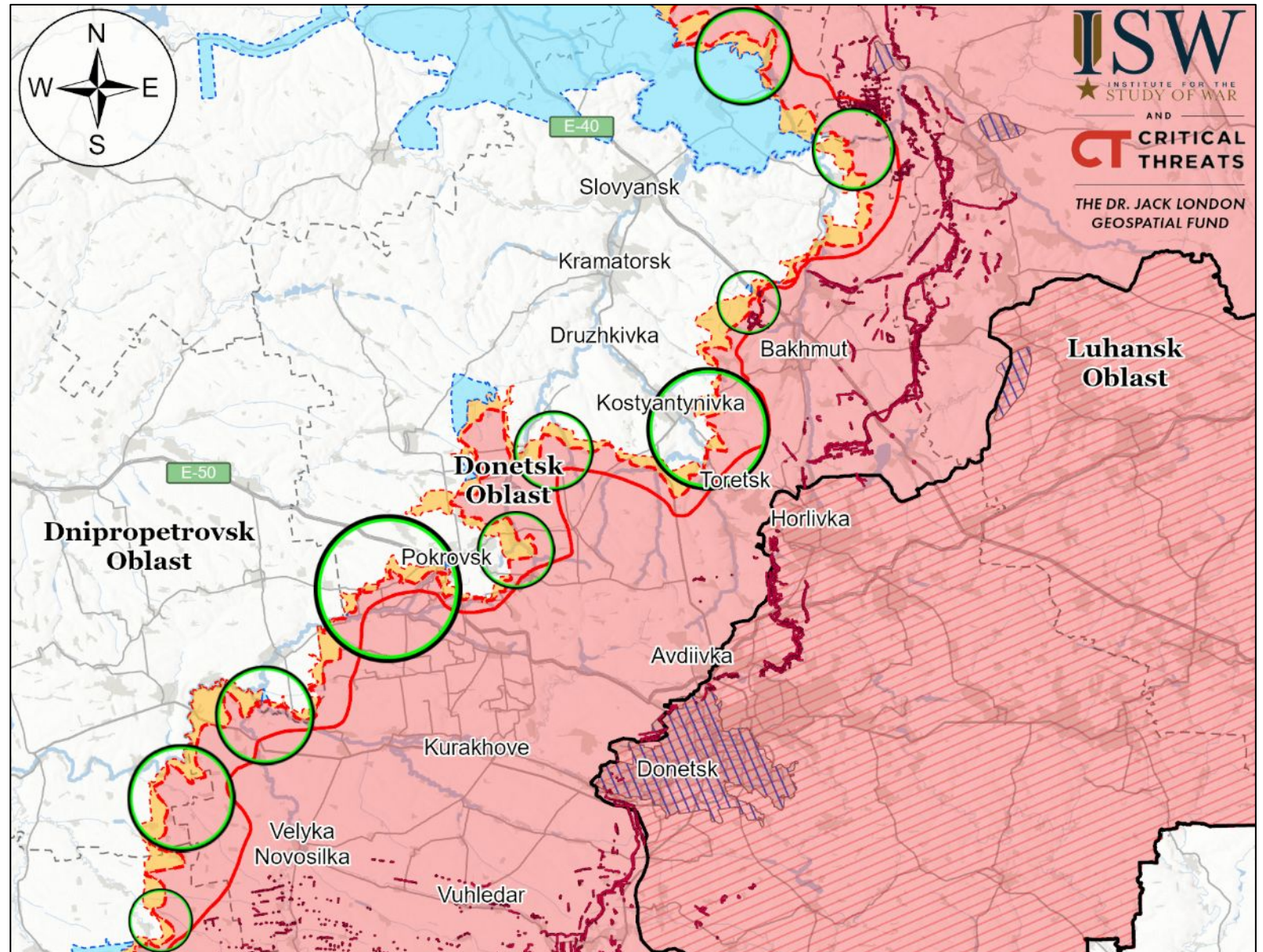
- ❖ Russia's main strategic goal is to control Donbass and Crimea. Zaporizhzhia and Kherson are land bridges to connect and consolidate Donbass and Crimea
- ❖ Since Crimea and Luhansk have been fully occupied, the current task is to complete the occupation of entire Donetsk

4th Stage: Stalemate since end of 2022

❖ There have been other fronts along the Russo-Ukrainian border. However, the Russian incursion into Kharkiv on 5/9/2024 and Ukrainian invasion of Kursk on 8/6 are both diversionary actions designed to lure the opponent to draw its troops from the Donetsk front. The Ukrainian incursion of Kursk was a failure



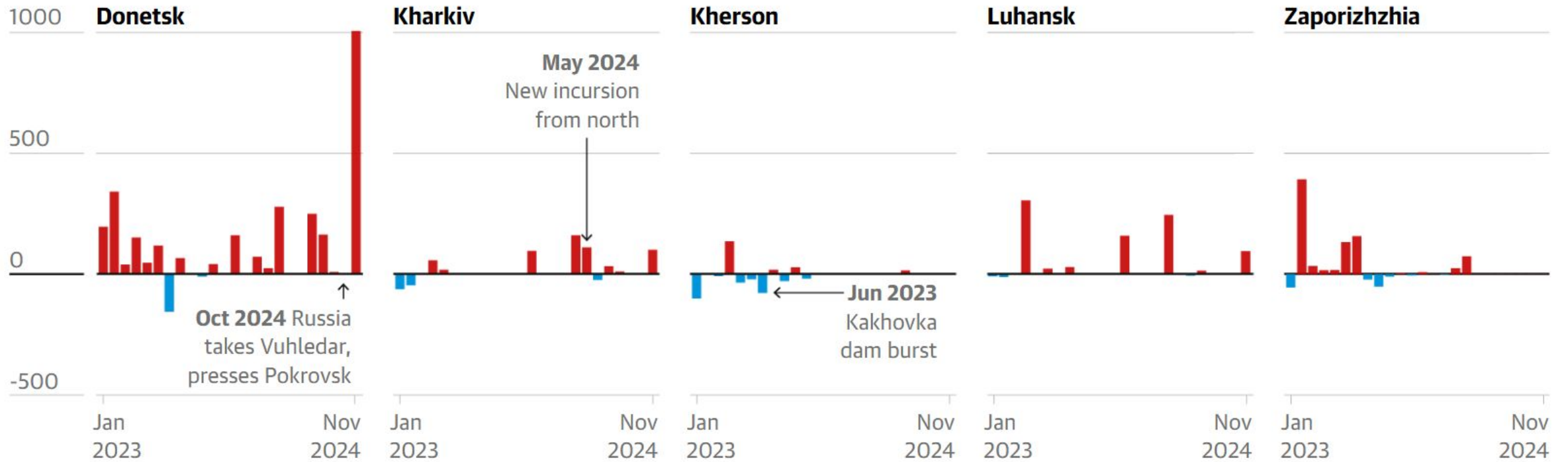
All the major battles since the end of 2022 have been fought on the Donetsk front



Major territorial gains by Russia concentrated in Donetsk

Monthly change in Russian-controlled territory in five selected regions, sq km

■ Gains ■ Losses





Russian Invasion of Ukraine Stalemated and Concentrated in Donetsk

Why?

**And what are the implications
of the two features above
on the possible ending
of the War?**



A Stalemated War

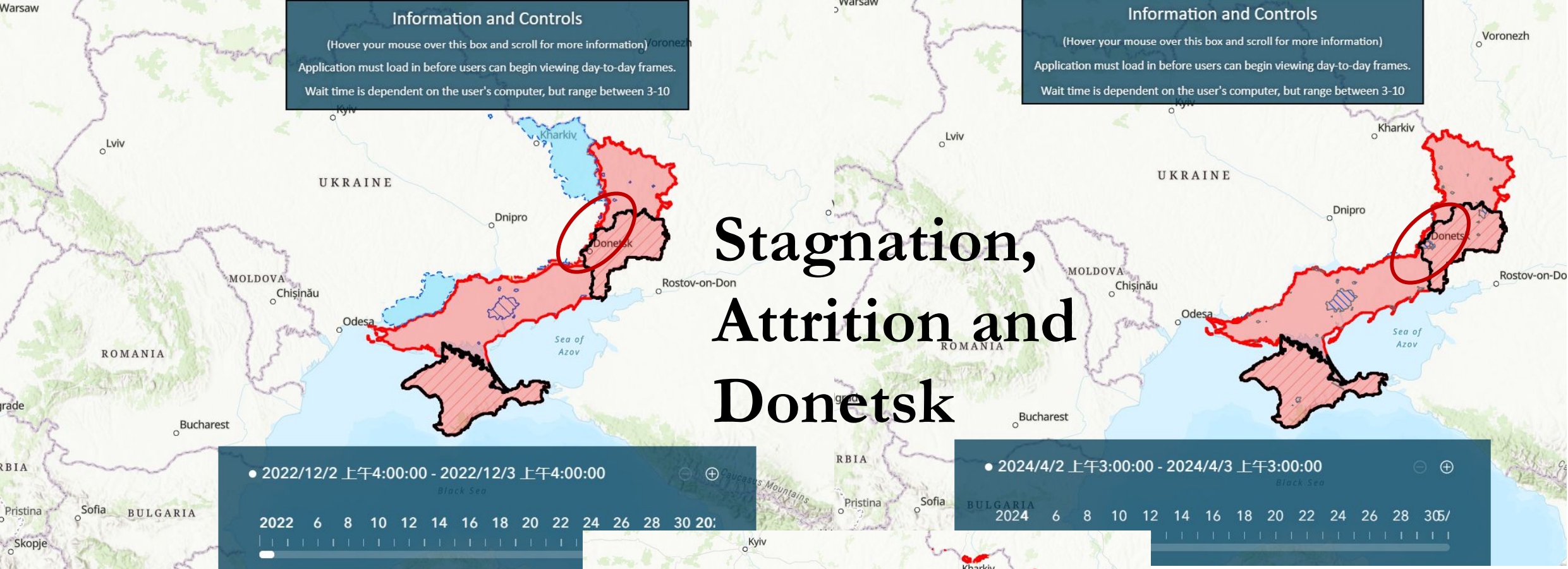
Warsaw

Information and Controls

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Application must load in before users can begin viewing day-to-day frames.

Wait time is dependent on the user's computer, but range between 3-10



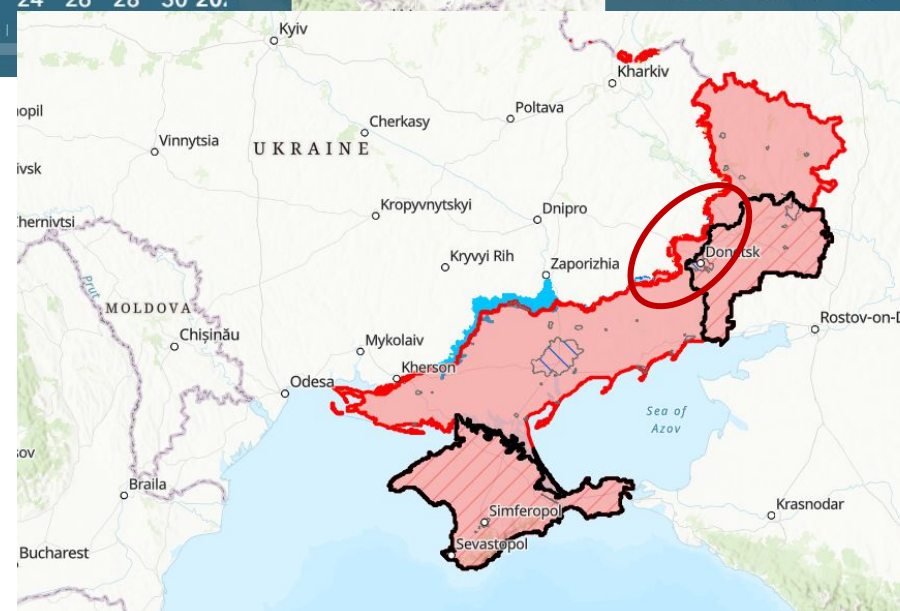
Stagnation, Attrition and Donetsk

Information and Controls

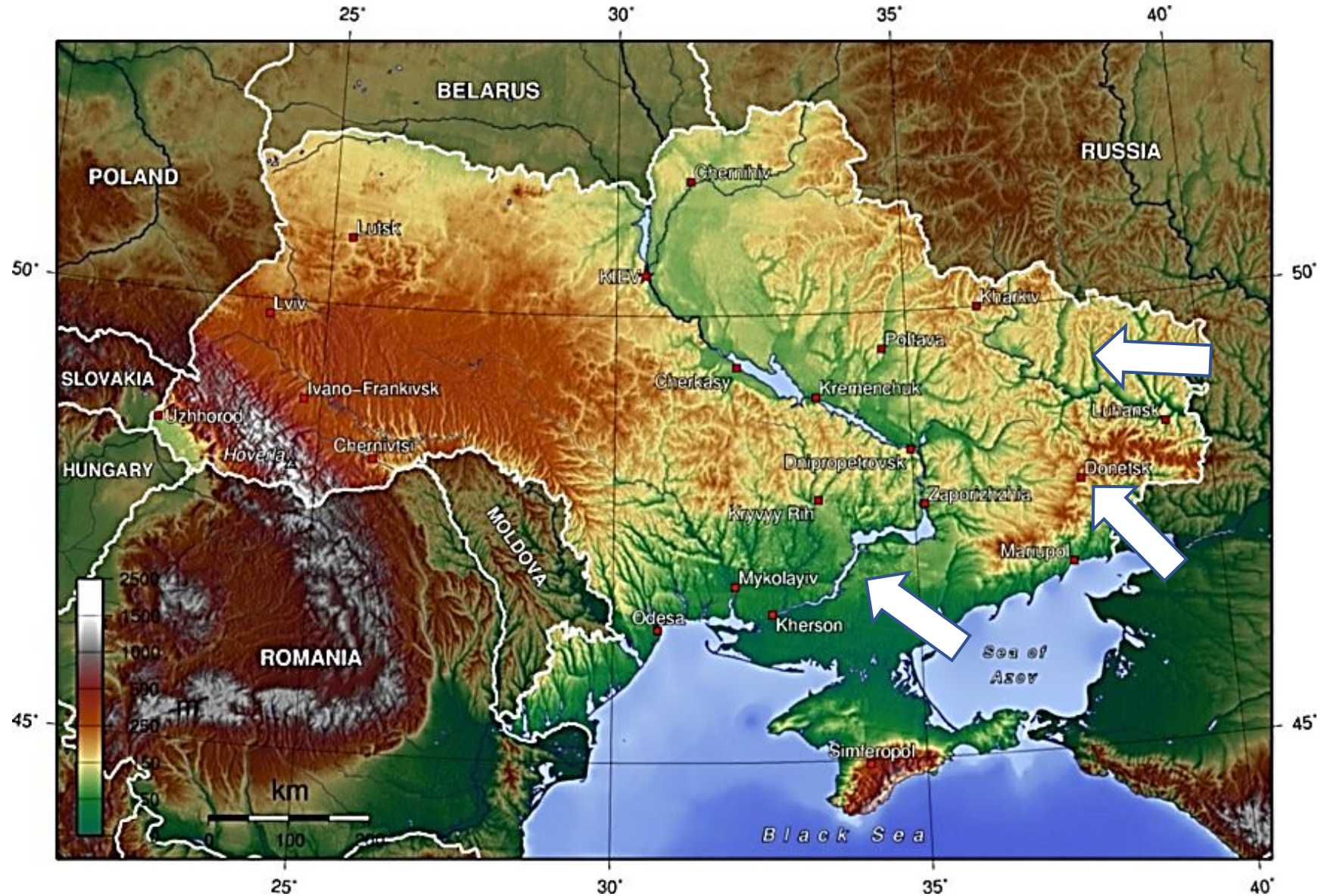
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Topography has its impact





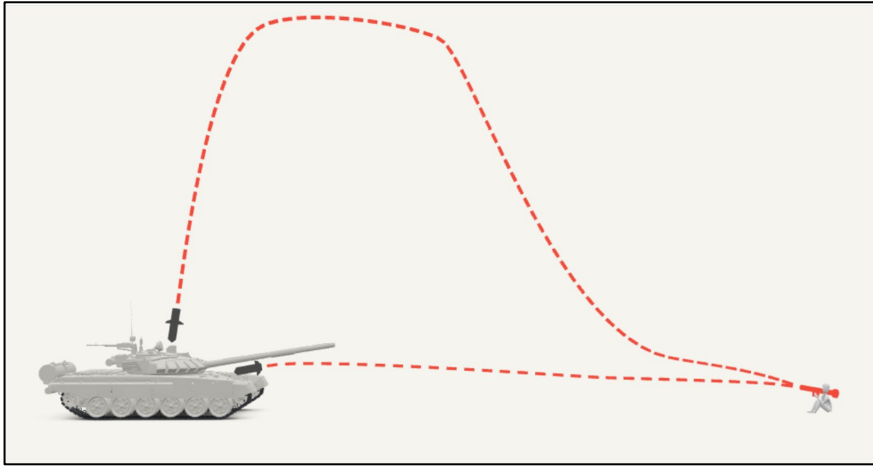
Topography
has its impact

Ukraine's commander-in-chief, General Valery Zaluzhny

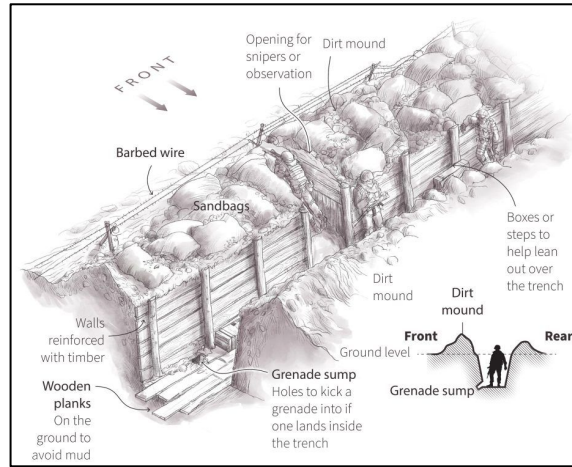


“Just like in the first world war we have reached the level of technology that puts us into a stalemate,” he says. The general concludes that it would take a massive technological leap to break the deadlock. “There will most likely be no deep and beautiful breakthrough.”

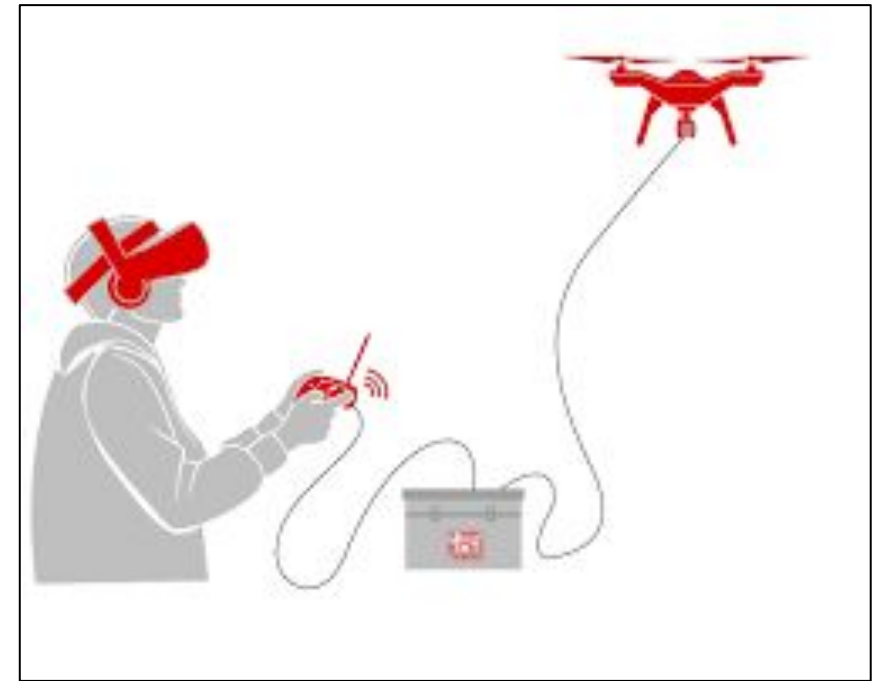
Technology favors defense and attrition not great breakthrough



2022 Anti-tank Javelin missile



2023 Trench war (Bakhmut)



2025 fiber optic FPV drones



2024 FPV drones

Ukraine outnumbered but can still hold on

Russia has three-fold frontline advantage: Ukraine army chief

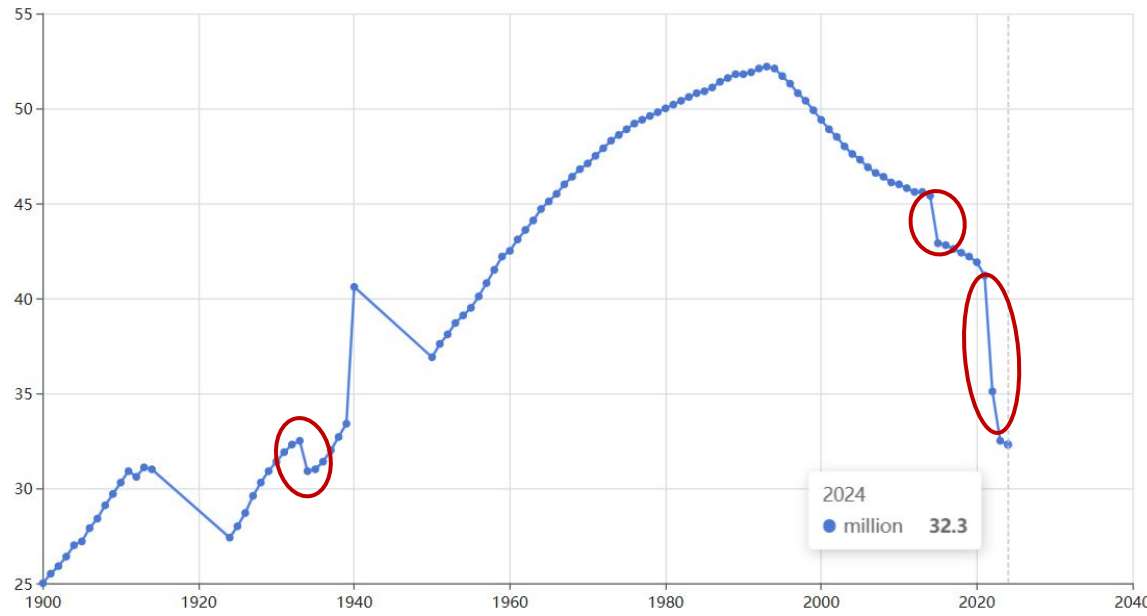
By AFP

Published: September 08, 2025 at 3:06PM EDT



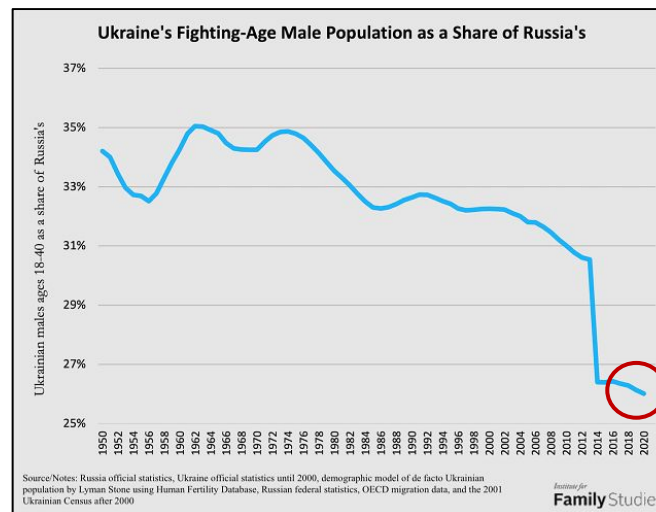
Oleksandr Syrskyi, commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. (Andrew Kravchenko/Photographer: Andrew Kravchenko/)

Rule of Thumb: The attacker needs at least a 3:1 advantage to break through a defender's front. That's the current situation on the eastern front in Ukraine: very slow advance by Russia and war of attrition



Data for 1926–2001 is based on official Soviet and Ukrainian censuses.^[13] The 2014 and 2020 figures are adjusted estimates, excluding Crimea and occupied territories in Donbas.^[14]

1933-1934, minus 1.6 m-3.2 m, Holodomor
2014-2015, minus 2.5 m
2021-2023, minus 8.7 m



Source/Notes: Russia official statistics, Ukraine official statistics until 2000, demographic model of de facto Ukrainian population by Lyman Stone using Human Fertility Database, Russian federal statistics, OECD migration data, and the 2001 Ukrainian Census after 2000

FamilyStudies

The War Turned Economic

*In 2024, Ukrainian
economy grew by 2.9
%, compared with
Russia's 4.1%*



Сергей Шойгу,
2012-2024



Олексій Резніков,
2021-2023



Андрей Белоусов, 2024-
Economic Minister, Deputy PM

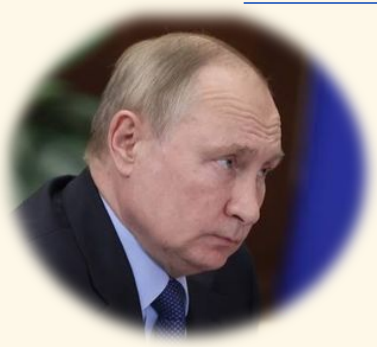


Рустем Умеров, 2023-
Chairman of State Property Fund, Investor

The Stalemate

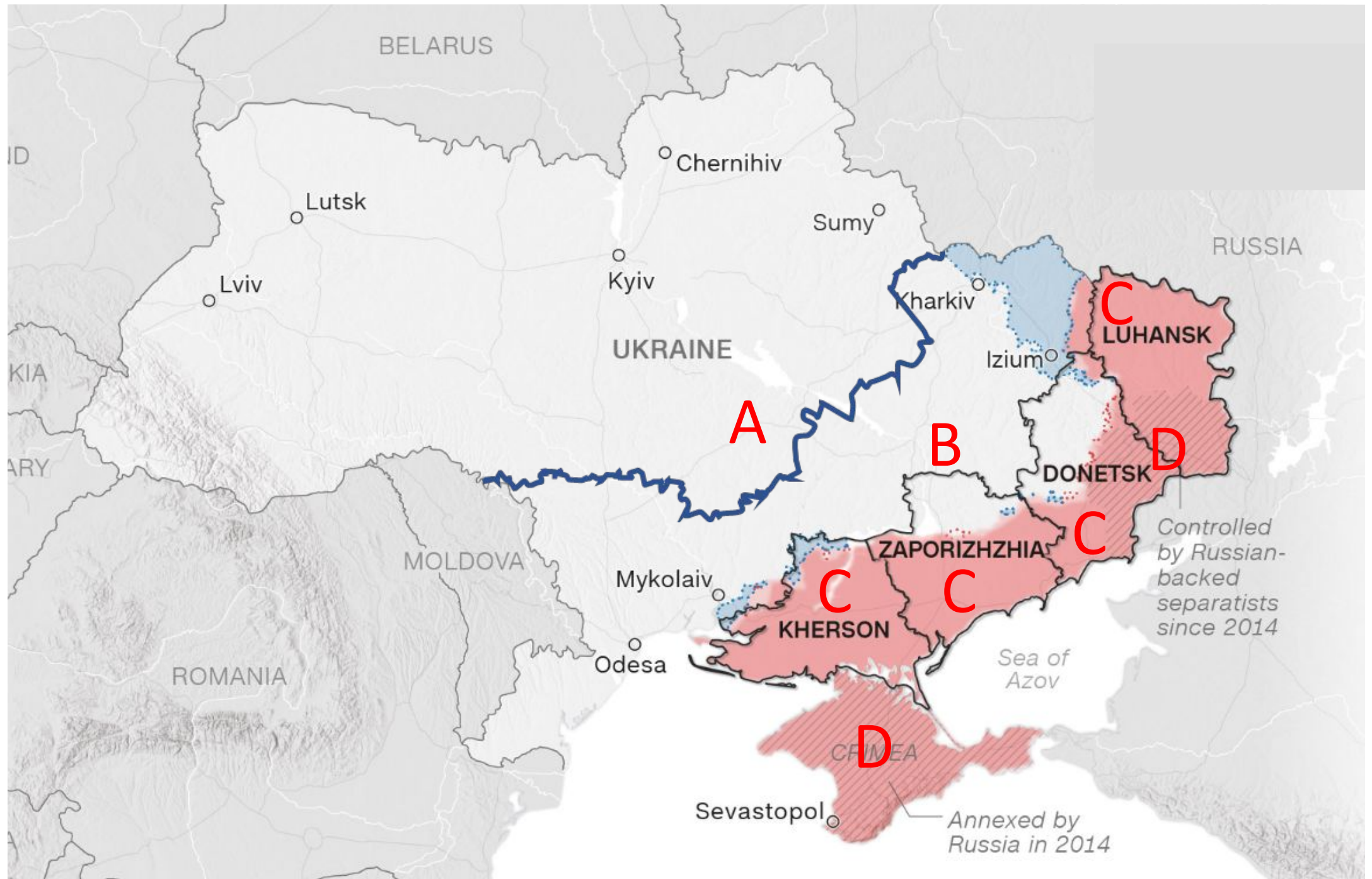
*A delicate balance has been sustained for
almost three years through topography,
technology, manpower and economy*

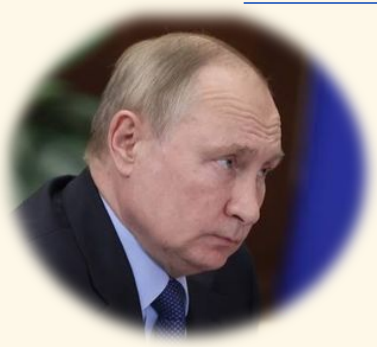
Donetsk and Why



Shift from Security to Nationality

- ❖ Russia's maximum goal is to control entire Ukraine, so that it will not become part of the Western maritime alliance, and to stop de-Russification (Goal A)
- ❖ If Goal A cannot be achieved, then Russia wants to control the southeastern half of Ukraine, the so-called "New Russia" (Goal B): Ethnic Turn
- ❖ If Goal B cannot be fully achieved, at least control the four southeasternmost provinces (Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson) and Crimea (including Sevastopol) (Goal C)
- ❖ Goal D is to sustain what Russia had already gained prior to the 2022 invasion: Crimea and part of Donbass





Russia's priorities

- ❖ Why Donetsk?
 - ❖ Crimea and Donbass are top priorities (with highest intrinsic values)
 - ❖ Zaporizhzhia and Kherson are necessary land bridges that connect Crimea, Donbass and Russia (with derivative values), hence Goal C
 - ❖ Goal A and Goal B are not achievable, but Goal C is
 - ❖ In Goal C, top priority goes to Donetsk, as Luhansk and Crimea have been fully under Russian control, hence the obsession with Donetsk



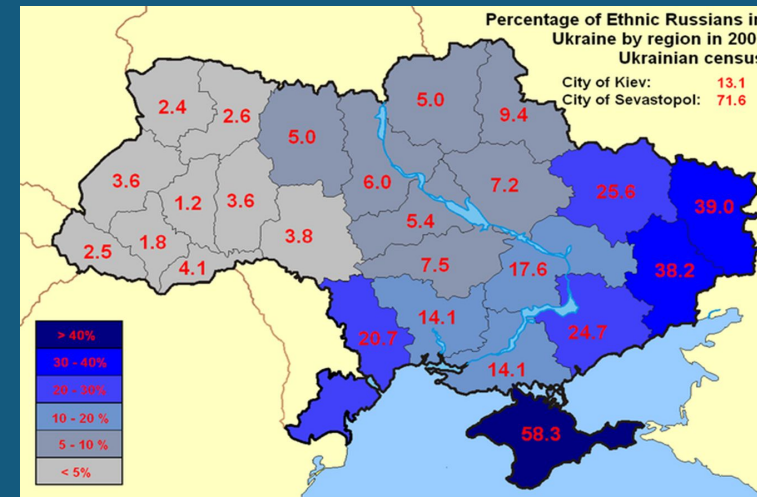
Source: ISW (21:00 GMT, 13 May)

West Ukraine: Most Recent Acquisition



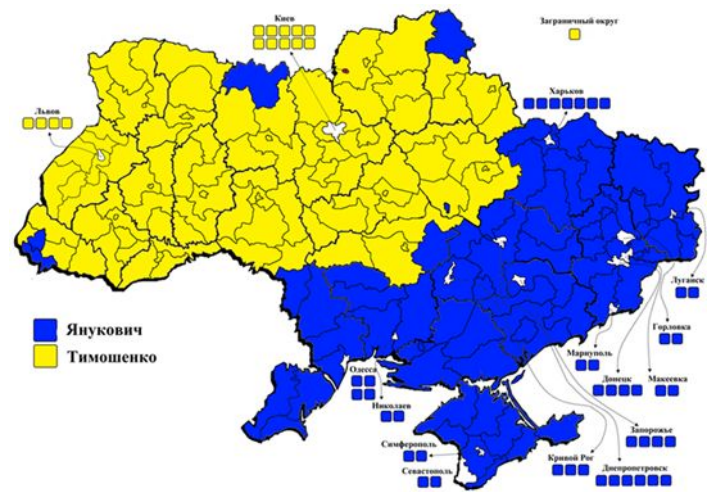
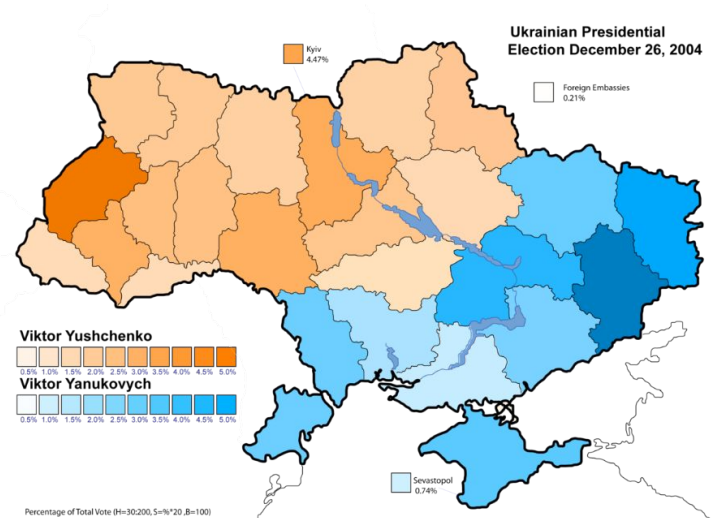
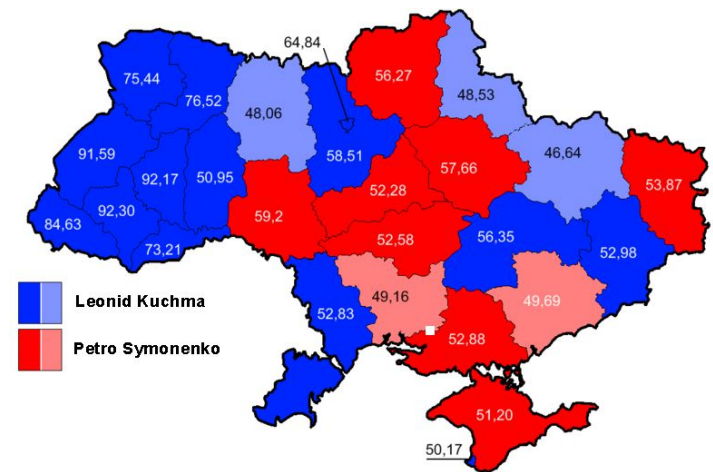
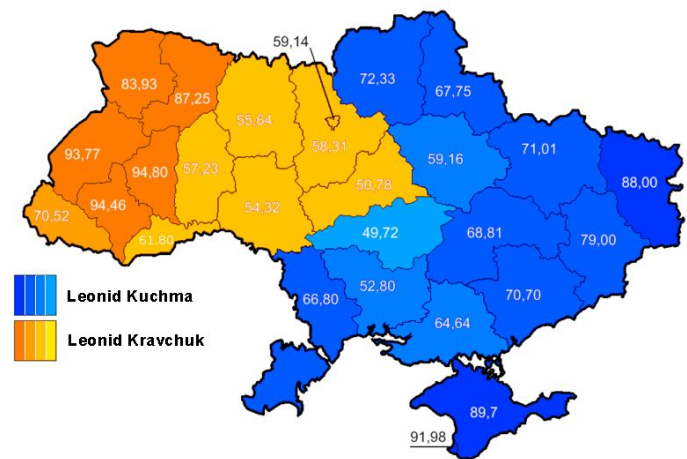


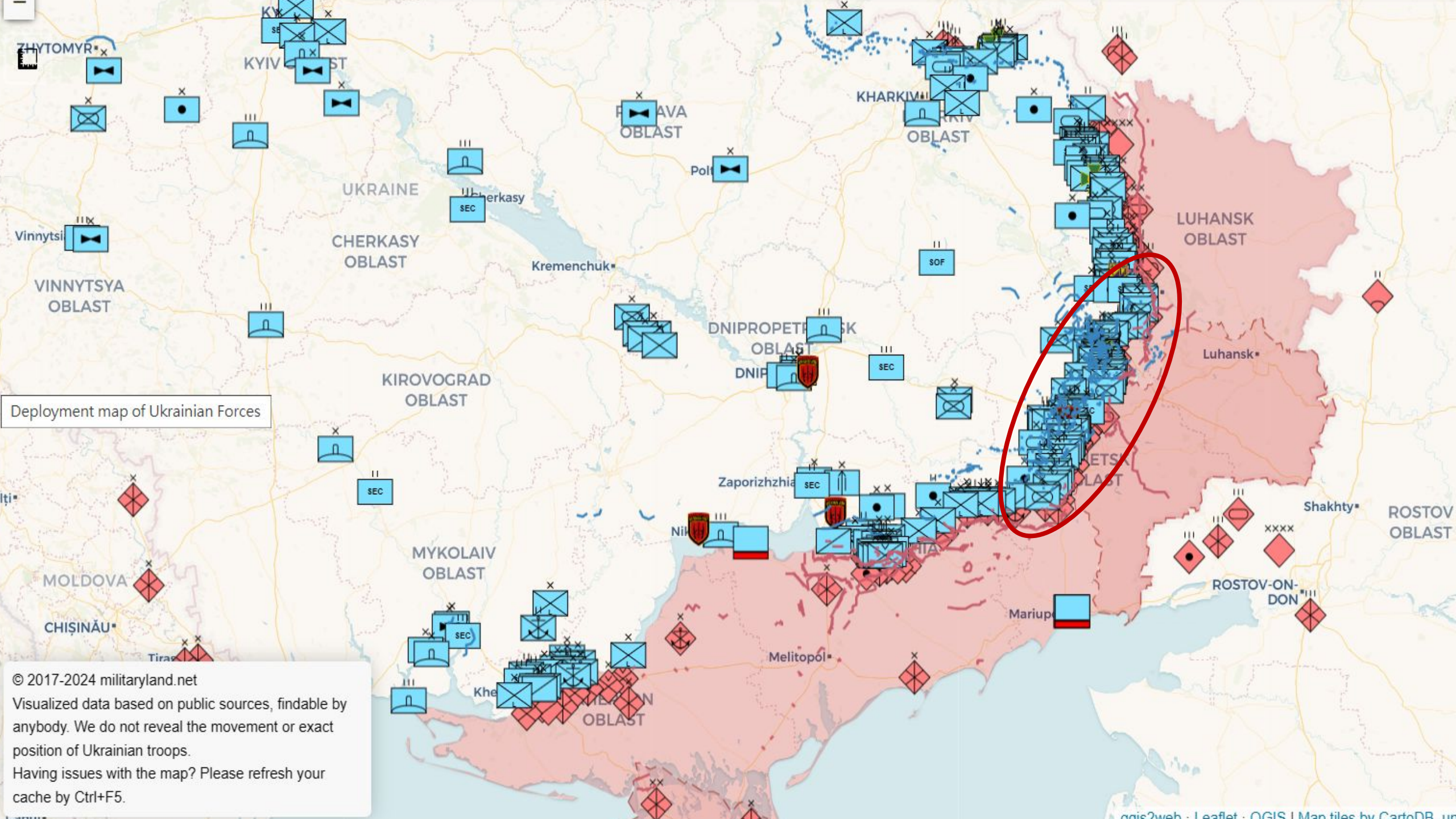
Ukraine: Political Divide
along ethnic-linguistic
line—Northwest vs.
Southeast as a result of
Conquest History



Ukraine: A divide that lasts

Presidential Elections, 1994-2010





Deployment map of Ukrainian Forces

© 2017-2024 militaryland.net
Visualized data based on public sources, findable by anybody. We do not reveal the movement or exact position of Ukrainian troops.
Having issues with the map? Please refresh your cache by Ctrl+F5.



1x < 13.09.2025 > [Calendar Icon] [Reset Icon]

Information



Territory Control

Occupied after February 24th 2022

70.808 ths. km² +3.0 km² 11.73%

Occupied before February 24th 2022

43.969 ths. km² 7.28%

Liberated

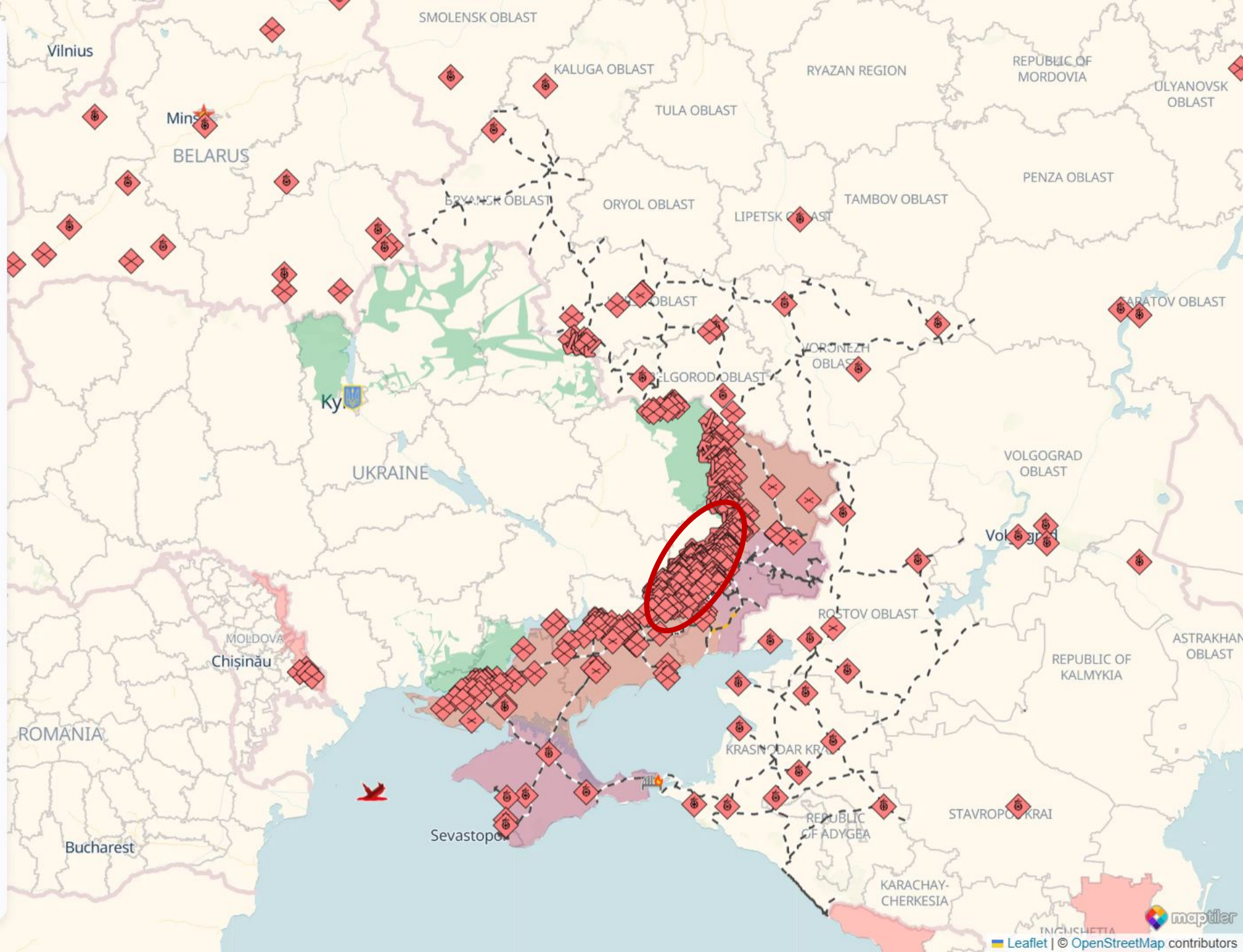
41.643 ths. km² -9.1 km² 6.90%

Total temporarily occupied

114.777 ths. km² +3.0 km² 19.01%

Map Legend

- territory liberated in the last two weeks
- liberated territory
- gray zone
- occupied territory
- occupied Crimea and ORDLO (2014-2015)
- occupied territories of other countries
- railways
- railways under construction





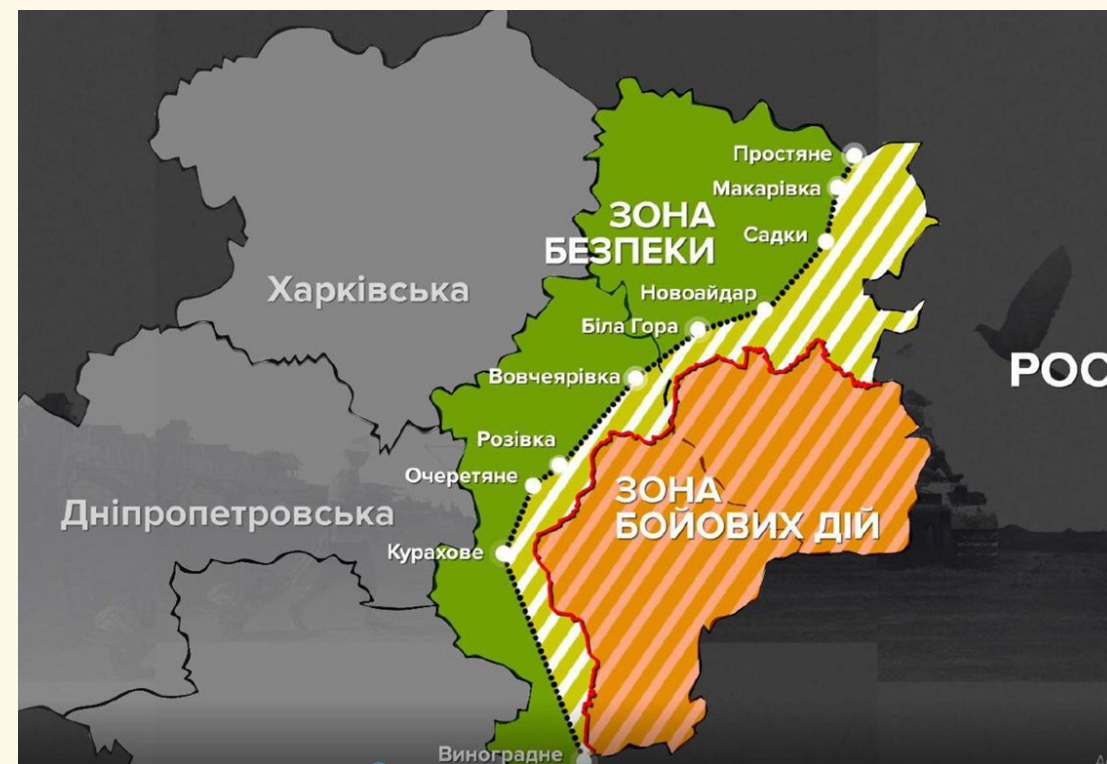
■ Russian military control ■ Claimed Russian control
▨ Limited Russian military control □ Russia annexed Crimea in 2014

Source: ISW and AEI's Critical Threats Project (21:00 GMT, 08 September) **BBC**

That is why the most ferocious battles of Бахмут (5/2023) and Авдіївка (2/2024) took place on this front



Since the two separatist republics were formed in 2014, Ukraine has used its elite military units Joint Forces Operation (Операція об'єднаних сил, ООС) to encircle the Donetsk People's Republic. It is difficult for Russia to break through the fortifications and advance to Kramatorsk. Russia has not yet fully broken through this defensive line





Prospects

Donbass: We
liberated this
land



Савур-
Могилы



Russian goal and strategy

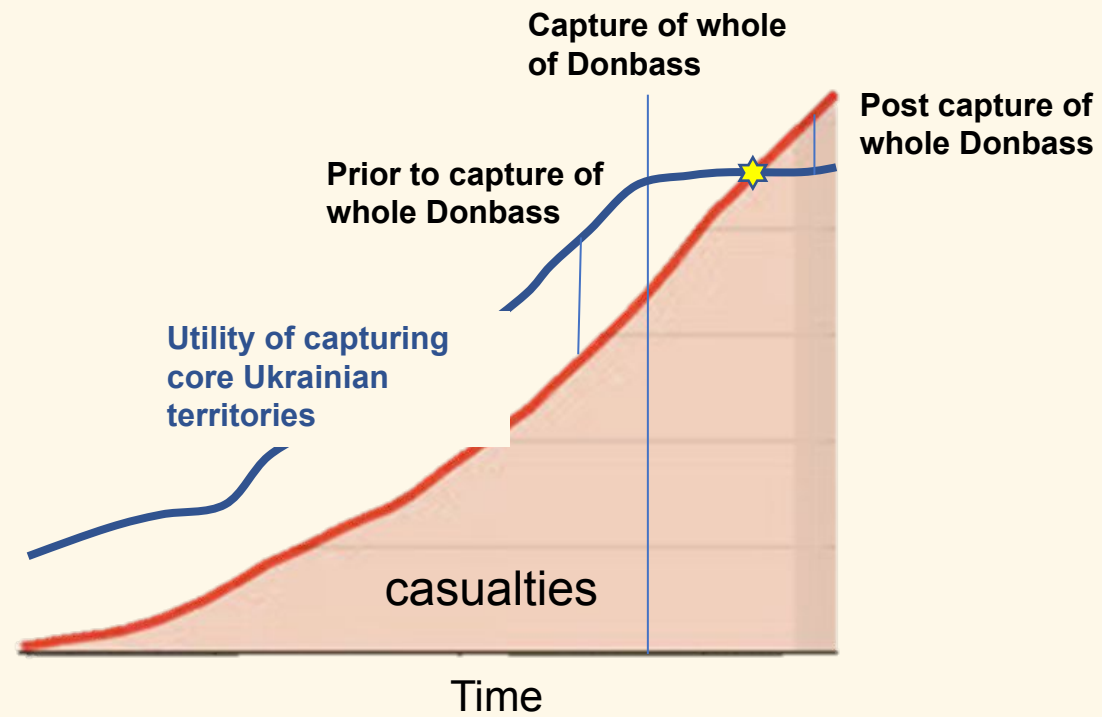
- ❖ To capture the entirety of Donetsk (namely Donbass) is of tremendous importance to Putin and Russian people that Russia will not stop until they reach all the borders of Donetsk with neighboring provinces
- ❖ They can bear with occupying 70 percent of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, namely, not achieving the entirety of Goal C, for the two provinces are not as important as Donbass
- ❖ In the long run, a “frozen conflict” situation may arise between Russia and Ukraine, as neither side can accept what the other considers minimum requirements for peace, and yet a stalemated war is deemed too costly



Russian goal and strategy

- ❖ Ukraine can never accept the permanent loss of the four oblasts and Crimea, while Russia will not relinquish its territorial gains that have been sealed through referenda
- ❖ After the conquest of Donetsk, no further territorial gains would justify the immense losses that Russia has sustained through the war, hence the possibility of lowering war intensity
- ❖ Realizing the futility of fighting to recover the lost land, Ukraine also has great incentives to lower the intensity of war fighting
- ❖ Hence the chances of “frozen conflict,” but a frozen conflict can always be unfrozen: Nagorno-Karabakh, Taiwan

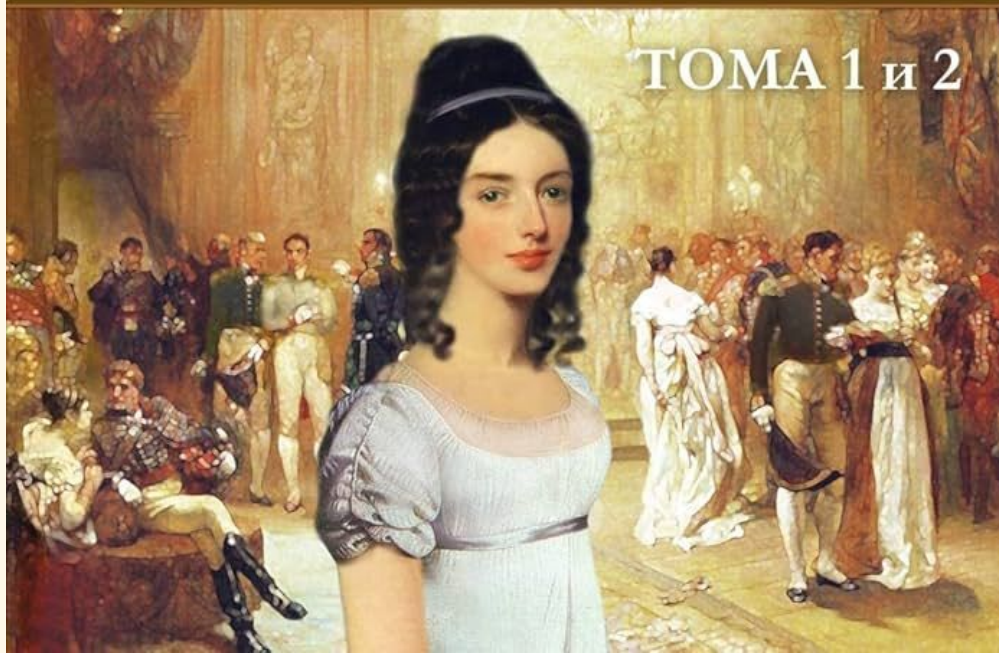
When would Putin stop?





Лев Николаевич Толстой

ВОЙНА И МИР



ТОМА 1 и 2

War and Peace

*A subject not only for Russia
and Ukraine, but also for the
two sides of the Taiwan Strait*

The End