

# Understanding Russian Troop Strength in Ukraine

Following the invasion of Ukraine by Russia in late February 2022, the U.S.-based [Institute for the Study of War \(ISW\)](#) published several reports designed to highlight detailed information about the war. In particular, a two-part analysis “[The High Price of Losing Ukraine](#)” discussed the strategic security implications for NATO in the event of Russian victory in Ukraine.

ISW aims to advance an informed understanding of military affairs through reliable research, trusted analysis, and innovative education. They are committed to improving the nation’s ability to execute military operations and respond to emerging threats to achieve U.S. strategic objectives. ISW is a non-partisan, non-profit, public policy research organization.

ISW started using Babel Street Insights in early 2023 due to its ability to surface a wide range of unique, multilanguage insights drawn from billions of publicly available data sources worldwide.

## The Challenge

In this case, ISW wanted to create a series of notional maps that showed the most current assessed Russian order of battle (ORBAT) in Ukraine. “Order of battle” is a military term used to describe the disposition of armed forces (troops, ships, aircraft, artillery, etc.) and their command and control arrangements within a defined geographic area or theater of war. The ORBAT allows analysts to understand how armed forces are task-organized to wage war and achieve objectives. Creating the maps required information on the whereabouts of all Russian combat units in Ukraine which would represent the current battlefield situation.

The maps would serve as a baseline for hypothetical permanent deployment points of Russian military units near Ukraine’s and Belarus’ international borders in the event of full Russian victory in Ukraine. ISW sought to demonstrate that Russia had already deployed most, if not all, of its combat units to Ukraine and that a Russian victory would allow it to use these battle-hardened forces against NATO if it managed to reach Ukraine’s westernmost borders. The ORBAT would show that continued Western support for Ukraine could allow Ukrainian forces to defeat much of Russia’s military force there, while Russia’s victory could allow Russian forces to threaten the NATO border from the Black Sea to the Arctic Ocean — greatly increasing the cost of defending NATO.



## Babel Street Delivers Essential Insights

To formulate the ORBAT, Kateryna Stepanenko, ISW Russia Analyst and Deputy Team Lead used Babel Street Insights to search for information about Russian troop deployments across the entire Russian internet. Babel Street has unmatched access to Russian social media platforms such as VK and Telegram, which allowed her to find ORBAT information from sources that would otherwise not appear in a regular search browser.

This streamlined what would have required hours of manual searching to identify the current locations of scores of units. Stepanenko commented, “I was able to find the location of certain Russian military units because Babel Street Insights found several social media posts from families of Russian servicemen who revealed the current locations of these military units.”

Insights enabled Stepanenko to find obituaries for Russian servicemen on local social media groups and media outlets that also revealed important ORBAT information. Crucially, Insights also preserves deleted comments, which revealed ORBAT information that otherwise would have been deleted or censored.

Stepanenko said that she used different combinations of keywords, names, and abbreviations to represent individual Russian military units in Russian, Ukrainian, and English. For example, to find the Russian 69th Separate Covering Brigade, Stepanenko used key words such as: “69<sup>th</sup> Separate Covering Brigade,” “69 обрп,” “в/ч 61424,” “69-я отдельная бригада прикрытия,” and “69-я отдельная Свирско-Померанская Краснознамённая ордена Красной Звезды, Амурская казачья бригада прикрытия” – all different ways that original Russian sources refer to a singular unit.

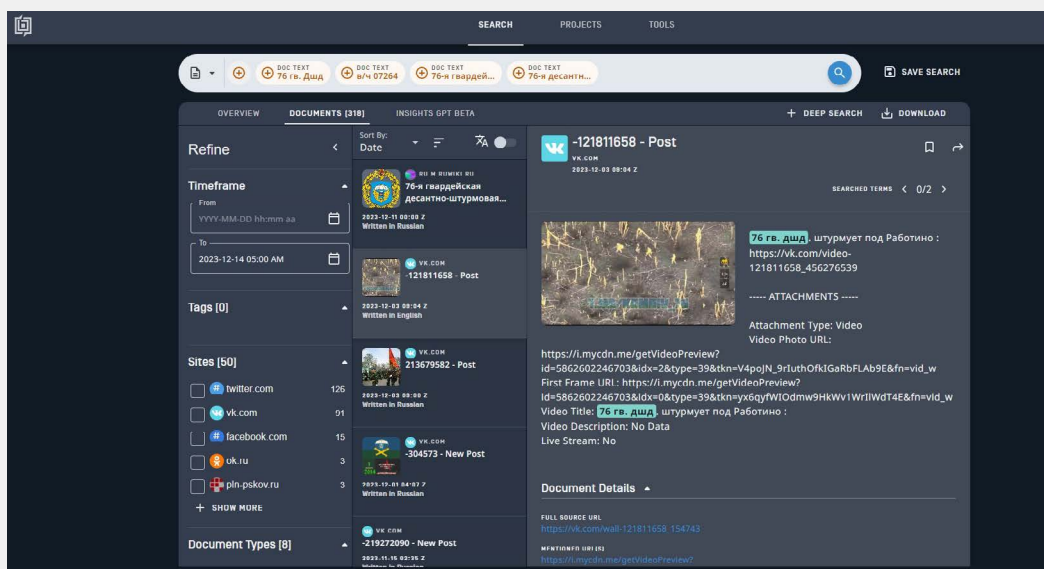


Figure 1 – An Insights search for posts mentioning the elite Russian 76th Guards Air Assault Division and its whereabouts in western Zaporizhia Oblast in December 2023

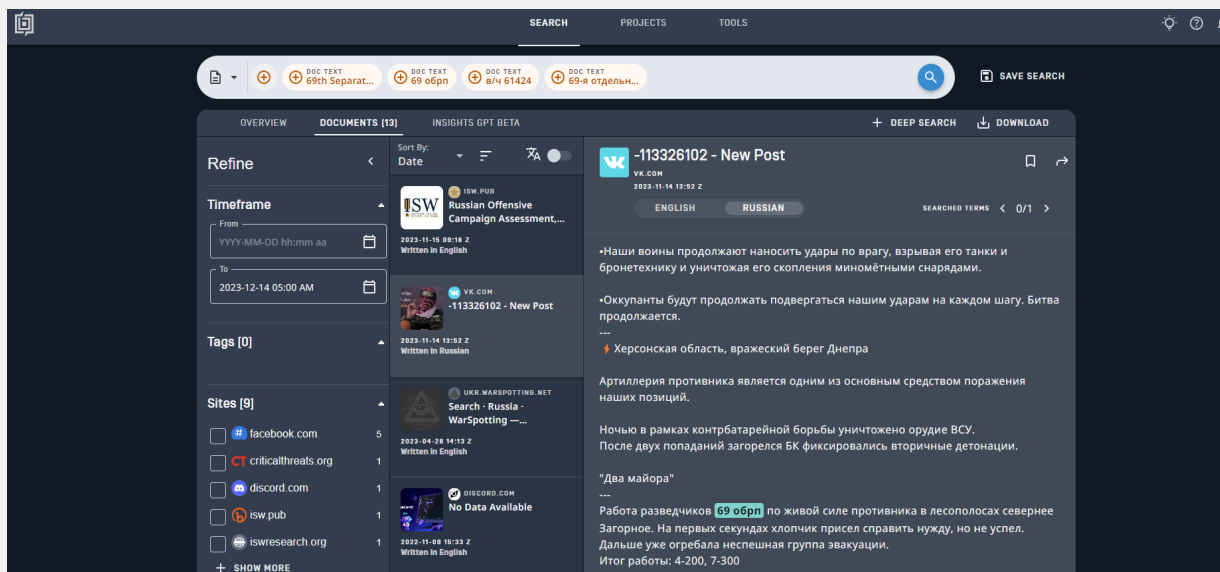


Figure 2 – An Insights search for the whereabouts of the Russian 69th Separate Covering Brigade, which prior to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine was a strictly defensive brigade on the Chinese border. Babel Street Insights enabled ISW to discover that this niche – and not particularly combat effective – brigade was operating in eastern Ukraine, demonstrating the extent to which Russia tapped all its conventional units to deploy to Ukraine.

## The Impact

This ORBAT became one of ISW's most quoted reports in late 2023 and 2024. The promotional post was retweeted on X 7,700 times, received 19,000 likes, 725 comments, and 3.5 million total views. On Facebook the report received over 400 likes, 139 comments, and 285 shares. The ISW team shared this assessment and maps on various TV broadcasts and podcasts. For example, Stepanenko shared this report on BBC World News and European Resilience Center podcast.

When asked what she found most useful about Babel Street Insights, Stepanenko responded that she valued its ability to:

- Search for information published by local social media groups
- Remove duplicates from the search
- View deleted articles and comments
- Create recurrent and persistent searches for ORBAT data

Stepanenko said that Babel Street Insights “saved her hours of searching across different search engines in Russian, Ukrainian, and English” and enabled her to “discover new information about the Russian ORBAT.”

ISW continues to use Insights for its ongoing monitoring and analysis of the conflict. Insights’ persistent search capabilities enable ISW to keep collecting relevant intelligence that is used by government officials, mainstream media, and the public.



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