

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, April 2, 2023
Kateryna Stepanenko and Frederick W. Kagan
April 2, 8:45 pm ET

Click [here](#) to see ISW’s interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Click [here](#) to access ISW’s archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain maps that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, April 2. This report discusses the assassination of prominent pro-war Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin (also known as Vladlen Tatarsky) in St. Petersburg on April 2. Fomin was one of the most significant Russian milbloggers with a Telegram platform of 560,000 followers and deep connections with the Wagner Group, the Kremlin, the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR), and the Russian nationalists who have been dominating the Russian information space since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Fomin’s assassination at a Wagner-affiliated bar in St. Petersburg may reveal further fractures within the Kremlin and its inner circle. Fomin was a vocal critic of the Russian military command and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Fomin’s death marks the first high-profile assassination of an ultranationalist milblogger in Russia since the start of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Unknown actors killed Russian milblogger Maksim Fomin in a deliberate and targeted attack during an event in a St. Petersburg bar reportedly belonging to Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin on April 2. Social media footage showed Fomin receiving a statue as a gift from a female audience member who introduced herself as a sculptor moments before the explosion.¹ Fomin was making a public presentation at the Street Food Bar #1 Café in downtown St. Petersburg. Russian authorities reported that the explosion killed Fomin and wounded 30 audience members who had gathered to listen to Fomin discuss his experience as a frontline correspondent.² The event was advertised as open to the public and had approximately 100 attendees. Prigozhin confirmed that he had offered his Street Food Bar #1 Café to the Russian ultranationalist movement “Kiber Front Z,” to hold Fomin’s event and other nationalist gatherings.³ Witnesses stated that the woman who presented the statue to Fomin identified herself as Nastya and told the audience that the event’s security asked her if there was a bomb inside the statue during a Q&A session.⁴ Witnesses noted that there was no security when entering the event, however, and that the explosion occurred within three to five minutes after the exchange between Fomin and the woman.⁵ Russian Interior Ministry sources told Russian state media that the explosive may have remotely detonated and that the woman or other unknown individuals may have been responsible for this attack.⁶ Russian state media published unconfirmed information that Russian police detained St. Petersburg resident Daria Trepova, who had previously been arrested for anti-war protests in February 2022.⁷ Russian Interior Ministry sources also revealed that Russian special services had known about assassination plans against Fomin for a long time.

Russian officials and propagandists have accused Ukraine of staging a “terrorist attack” to assassinate Fomin. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused Kyiv of Fomin’s assassination and praised Russian milbloggers for their war coverage—seemingly ignoring the fact that Fomin and other milbloggers routinely criticize the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA).⁸ Russian propagandist Tina Kandelaki stated that Russia needs to punish terrorists who still have “power, water, working railways, restaurants, and internet”—likely referring to Ukrainians who survived the Russian missile campaigns against the Ukrainian energy infrastructure during the fall of 2022 and the winter of 2023.⁹ Russian propagandist Margarita Simonyan echoed Kandelaki’s calls for retribution against Ukraine for this assassination.¹⁰ Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian agents have likely been attending similar milblogger events, blaming the attack on Ukrainian special forces and the failures of Russian security.¹¹

Prigozhin oddly stated on April 2 that he would not “blame the Kyiv regime” for the deaths of Fomin and Russian ultranationalist figure Daria Dugina, suggesting that Ukrainian agents were not in fact responsible.¹² Dugina was assassinated on August 20. Prigozhin noted that a group of radicals unaffiliated with the Ukrainian government may be responsible for such attacks. Advisor to Ukrainian Presidential Office Mykhailo Podolyak stated that Fomin’s death was a result of infighting and political competition among Russian actors.¹³

Fomin was a prominent figure in the Russian pro-war nationalist information space, although not more so than some others. Fomin was a Wagner-affiliated convict who escaped from prison in Donetsk Oblast at the outset of Russia’s invasion of Donbas in 2014.¹⁴ Fomin also claimed to have served in proxy armed formations, regularly expressed ultranationalist views, and balanced his allegiance to Wagner with remaining loyal to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Fomin attended Russian President Vladimir Putin’s event announcing the annexation of four Ukrainian regions on September 30 where he stated: “We will defeat everyone, we will kill everyone, we will rob everyone we need; Everything will be as we like.”¹⁵ ISW also uncovered that Fomin had been involved with Islamic jihadist propaganda, likely in order to expand Russian recruitment efforts.¹⁶ Fomin co-hosted a TV show with another prominent milblogger, appeared on Russian state media platforms, and participated in numerous Russian state broadcasts.¹⁷ Fomin had also led numerous crowdfunding and recruitment campaigns, promoted violent militarism, and supported Putin’s ideology and maximalist goals to “denazify” and “demilitarize” Ukraine.

Fomin shared his ideology and activities with many other Russian milbloggers, however, and does not appear to have been a target worthy of special attention from Kyiv. A number of the milbloggers ISW regularly uses and cites are not only war correspondents, but also participants in efforts to fund, recruit for, and advance the Russian war effort through various parastatal and private organizations.¹⁸ This cadre of milbloggers not only speaks to but also represents a constituency critical for Putin’s war effort. ISW has long assessed that the role these milbloggers play in all their capacities is a key factor explaining the surprising degree of tolerance Putin has hitherto shown them. Fomin’s assassination could be evidence that Putin’s tolerance toward these milbloggers, in general, is waning, but it could also have resulted instead from Fomin’s proximity to Prigozhin.

Fomin’s assassination at Prigozhin’s bar is likely part of a larger pattern of escalating Russian internal conflicts involving Prigozhin and Wagner. Fomin had attended another event earlier in the day without incident, so it appears that the attack was deliberately staged in a space owned by Prigozhin.¹⁹ Advisor to Ukrainian Presidential Office Mykhailo Podolyak stated that Fomin’s

death was a result of antifighting and political competition among Russian actors.²⁰ Some Russian political analysts also speculated that Prigozhin was supposed to attend Fomin's event, although there is no confirmation of that speculation.²¹

Fomin's assassination may have been intended as a warning to Prigozhin, who has been increasingly questioning core Kremlin talking points about the war in Ukraine and even obliquely signaling an interest in the Russian presidency, whether in competition with Putin or as his successor.²² Fomin's biography and behavior bear a resemblance to Prigozhin's as both became prominent ultranationalist figures after being imprisoned and receiving pardons.

Russian officials may be intending to use Fomin's assassination to drive the self-censorship of a growing Russian civil society questioning the progress of the war in bars.

ISW previously observed FSB raids of bars in Moscow and St. Petersburg in March launched on the basis of accusations that individuals in those bars were providing financial assistance to Ukrainian forces and involving minors in "anti-social acts."²³ Putin had instructed the FSB to intensify counterintelligence measures and crackdown against the spread of pro-Ukrainian ideology on February 28—an order that has been used to dismantle gatherings in Moscow and St. Petersburg bars. The Wagner-affiliated Kiber Front Z movement has been spearheading discussions about the war in Prigozhin-owned bars for months, and it is possible this high-profile assassination will discourage people from attending similar events. This attack may also be an effort to intimidate other Wagner-affiliated milbloggers.

The assassination is already deepening a divide within the Russian milblogger space, which may ultimately be beneficial to the Kremlin's efforts to consolidate control of the information space.

Prominent Russian milbloggers exposed the identity of a smaller milblogger publishing under the handle MoscowCalling who joked that the woman involved in Fomin's murder was Dugina.²⁴ The milbloggers claimed that former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) fighter Andrey Kurshin has been accusing Russia of war crimes in Ukraine using the handle MoscowCalling while residing in Moscow.²⁵ The milbloggers claimed that the Russian police and FSB have failed to prevent milbloggers such as Kurshin from fostering anti-government attitudes online, thereby allowing Ukrainian intelligence to stage attacks in Russia. The milbloggers also called for the arrests and executions of other milbloggers who have expressed similar views against Putin, his regime, and the conduct of the war.²⁶ The Kremlin may use such divisions to justify censorship of certain milbloggers who are vocal critics of Putin.

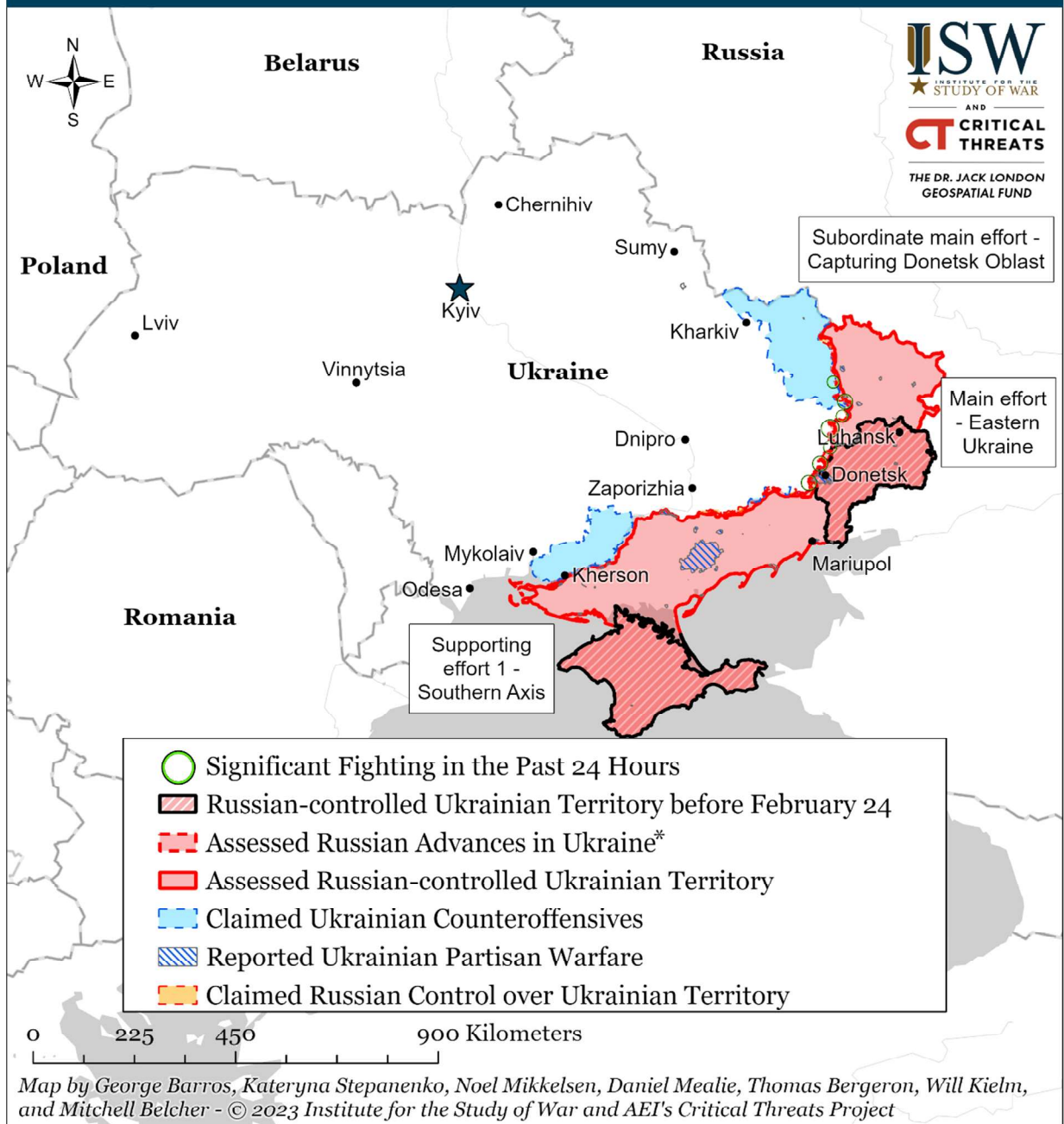
Key inflections in ongoing military operations on April 2:

- **Russian forces continued limited ground attacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line.²⁷ Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made marginal gains northwest of Kreminna.²⁸**
- **Russian forces continued to attack Bakhmut and its environs.²⁹ Russian forces likely seized the AZOM plant in northern Bakhmut as ISW has previously assessed. Ukrainian forces conducted a missile strike on the plant on April 2.³⁰**
- **Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks along the Avdiivka-Donetsk City line.³¹ Ukrainian Tavriisk Direction Forces Joint Press Center Spokesperson Oleksiy Dmytrashkivskyi stated that Russian forces retreated from unspecified positions in the Donetsk direction.³²**

- **Ukrainian forces conducted a HIMARS strike against a rail depot in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, the third strike against the city in the past week.³³**
- **The UK Ministry of Defense assessed that a significant minority of Russia’s 200,000 casualties in Ukraine are due to poor discipline and training outside of combat, including due to excessive alcohol consumption and mishandling of small arms.³⁴**
- **Former Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) official Rodion Miroshnik denied ISW’s April 1 report citing Miroshnik that Russian authorities are deporting Ukrainian children to Russia under rest-and-rehabilitation schemes.³⁵ Miroshnik claimed that mothers and children from Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast went to Russian sanatoriums for medical treatment.³⁶ Miroshnik denied being closely affiliated with the current occupation regime, claiming that he has not served as advisor to the Head of the LNR for a year.³⁷ LNR People’s Militia Press Service called Miroshnik “advisor to the LNR Head” as recently as January 29, 2023, however.³⁸ Miroshnik claimed on his Telegram channel that he served as LNR Ambassador to Russia as recently as November 13, 2022.³⁹**

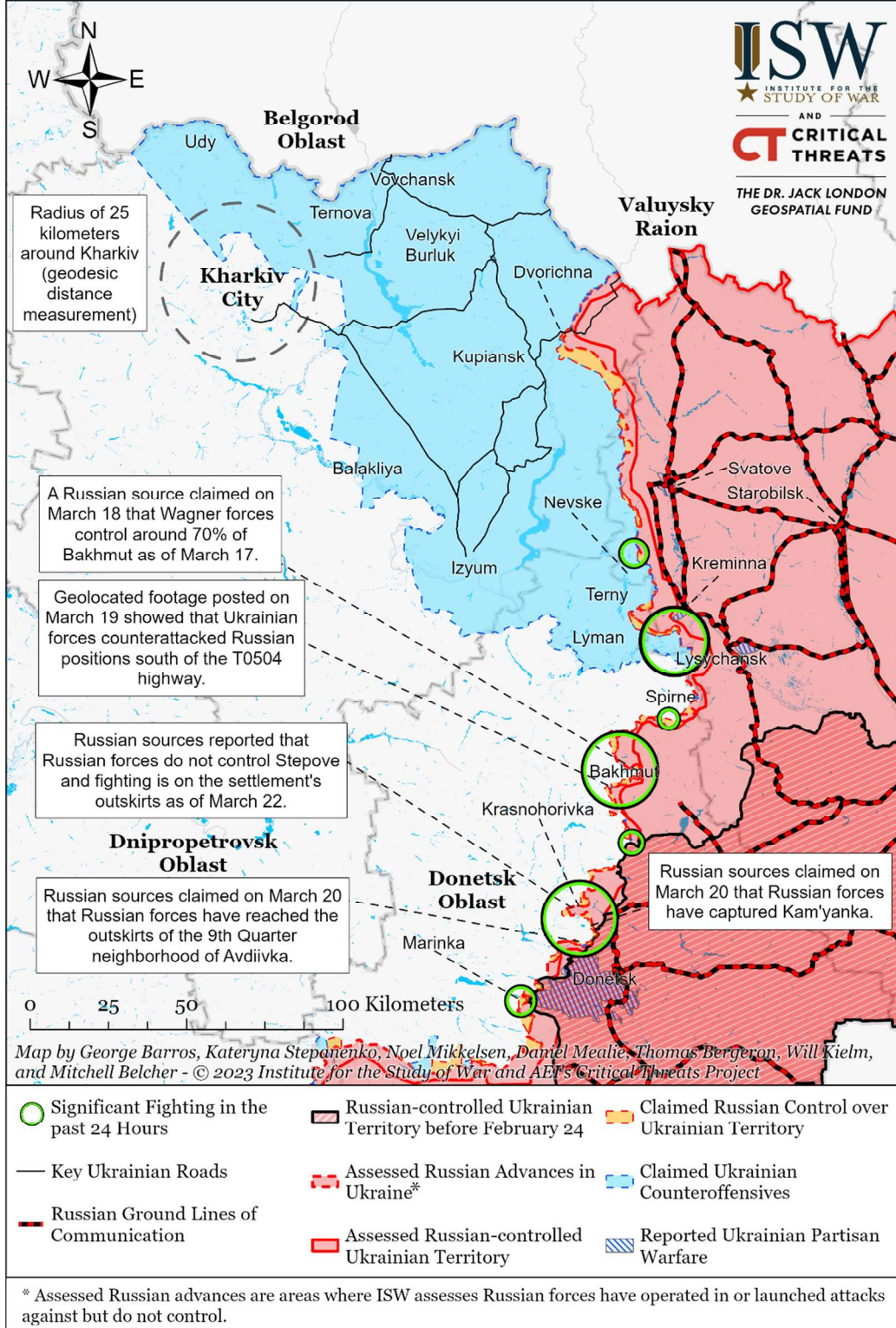
Correction: ISW incorrectly called May 9 the “Soviet Labor Day” in its April 1 update. The correct holiday is “Victory Day.”

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

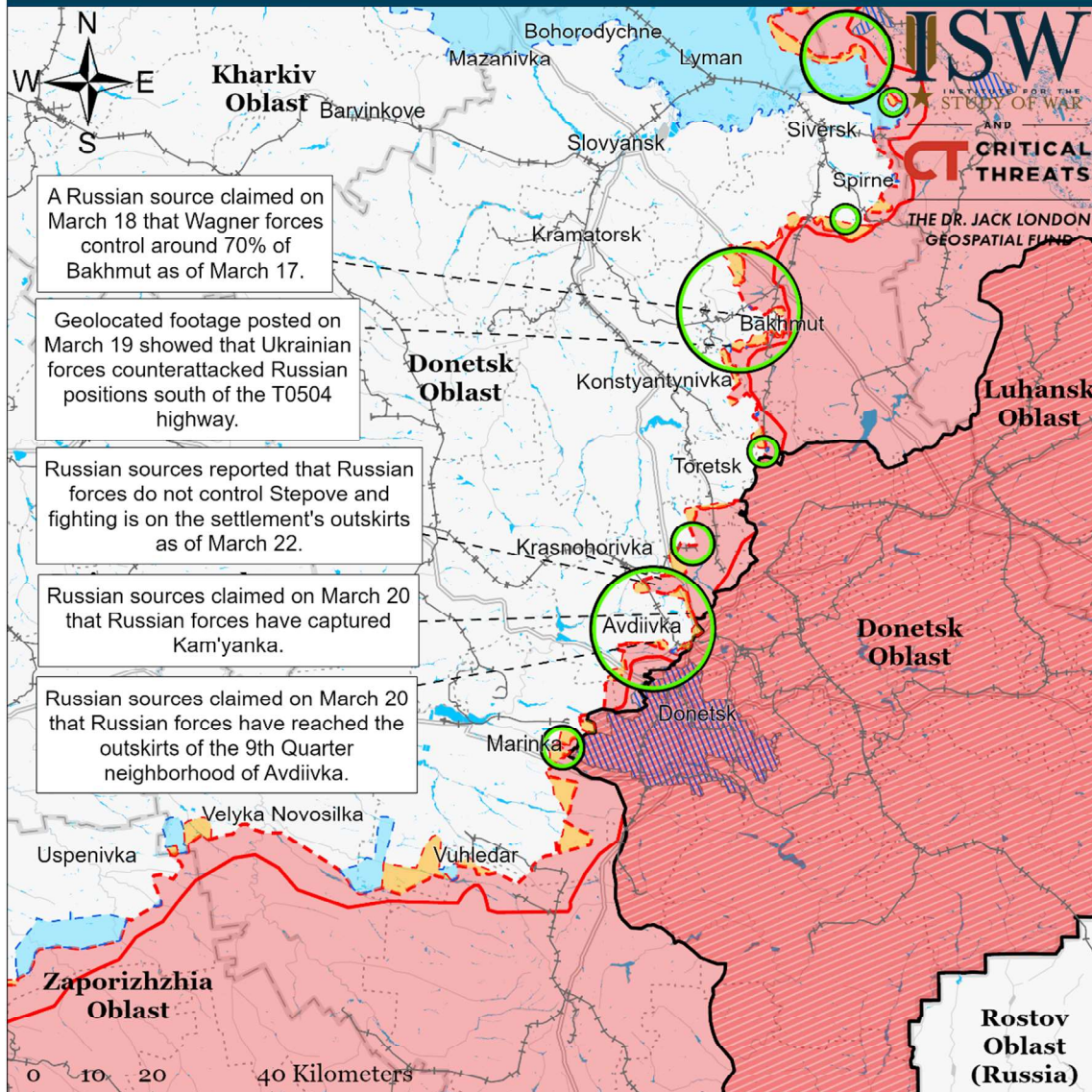


* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

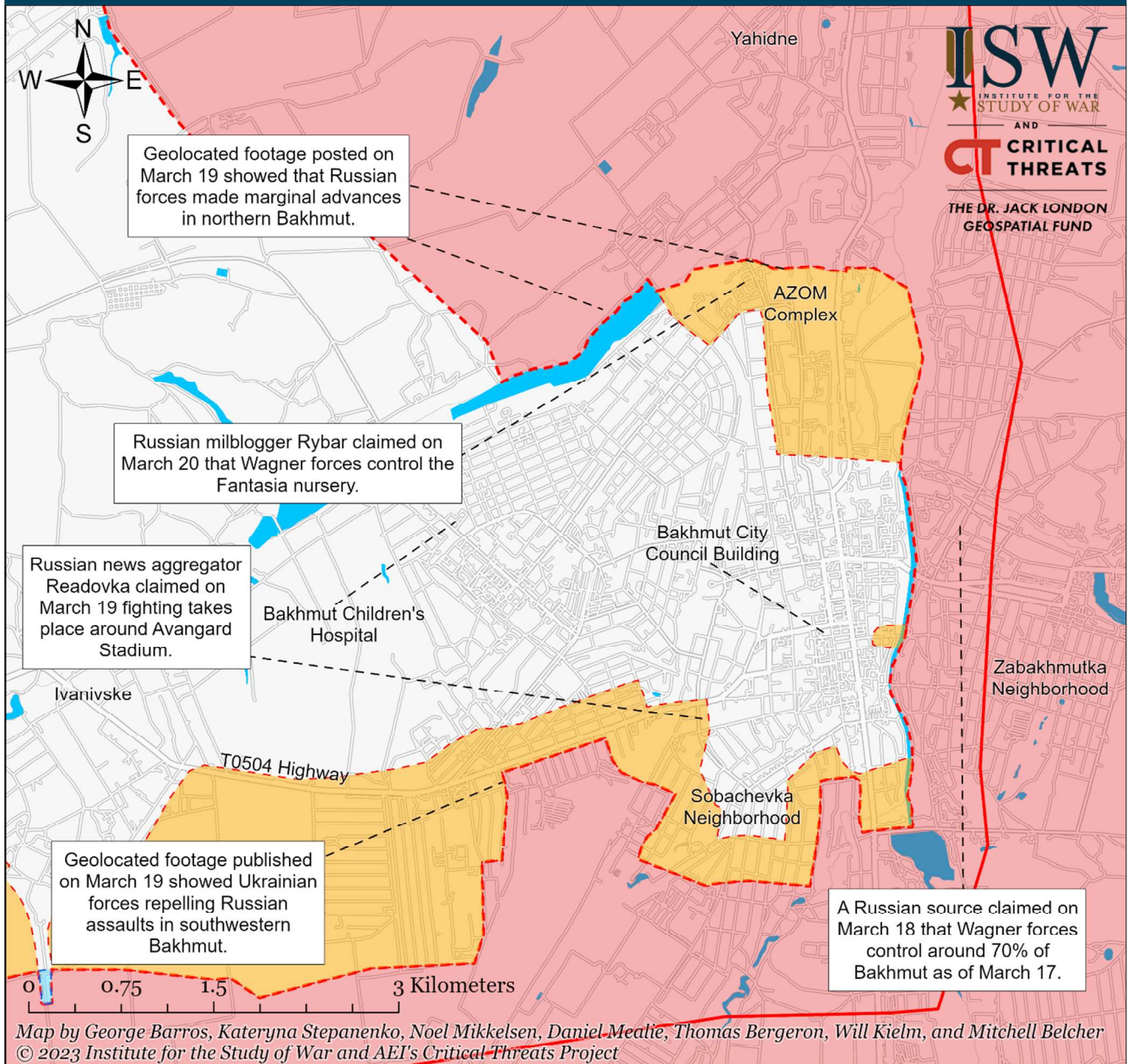


Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kiern, and Mitchell Belcher - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- 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 in Bakhmut as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET

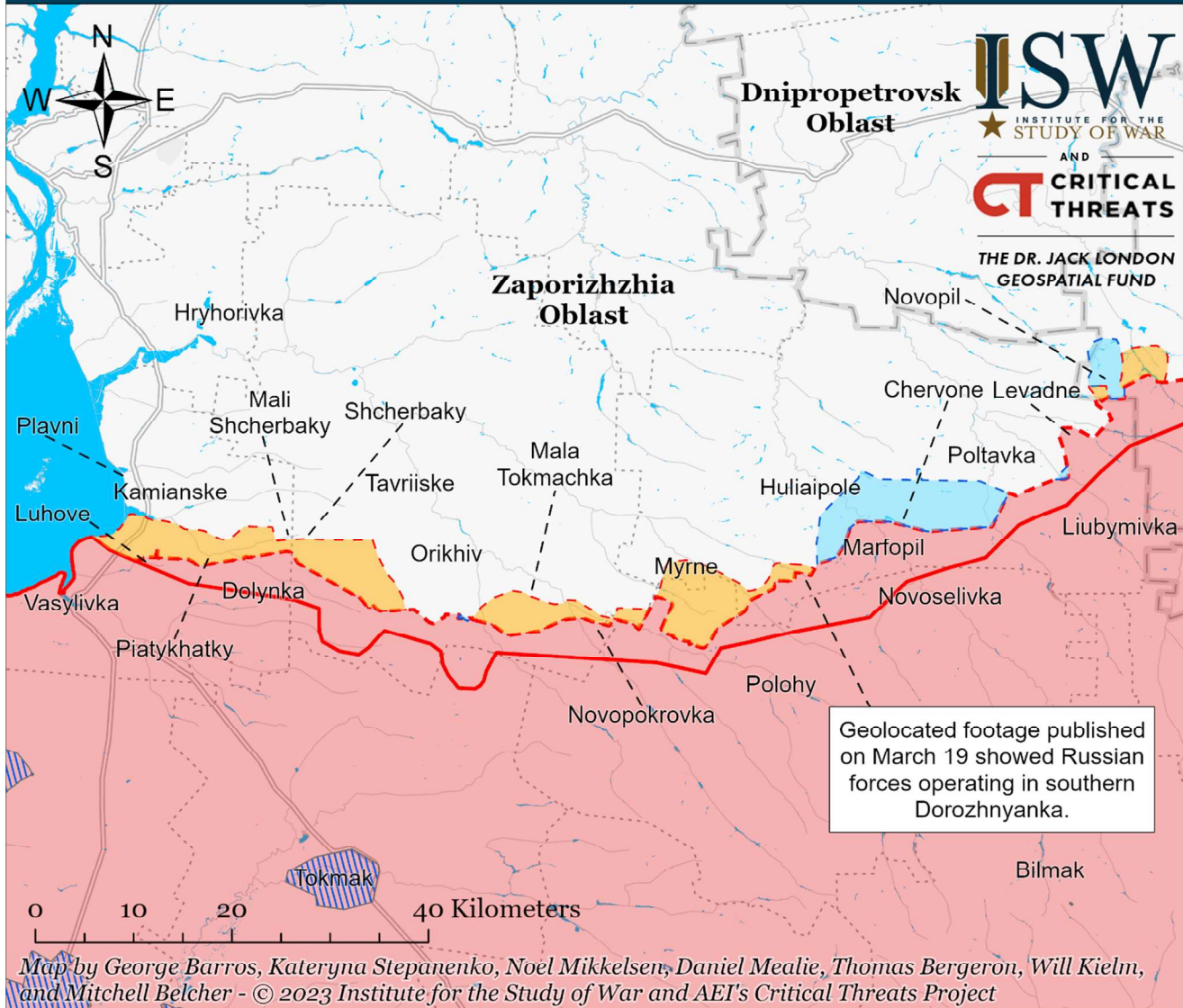


Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Will Kielm, and Mitchell Belcher © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine *
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- 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 Zaporizhia as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives

* 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 Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

-
- ¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/02/world/europe/russian-military-blogger-explosion.html>; <https://t.me/fontankaspb/37122>; https://t.me/rentv_news/90467; https://t.me/new_militarycolumnist/104740
- ² <https://meduza dot io/feature/2023/04/02/v-peterburge-v-kafe-evgeniya-prigozhina-proizoshel-vzryv-vo-vremya-tvorcheskogo-vechera-voenkora-vladlena-tatarskogo-po-predvaritelnyim-dannym-on-pogib>; https://t.me/rian_ru/198703
- ³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/02/world/europe/russian-military-blogger-explosion.html>; https://t.me/cyber_frontZ/10718; https://t.me/concordgroup_official/678
- ⁴ <https://www.spb dot kp.ru/daily/27485.5/4742343/>; https://twitter.com/the_ins_ru/status/1642563940730261506
- ⁵ <https://meduza dot io/feature/2023/04/02/kakaya-to-poklonnitsa-podarila-statuetku-posle-etogo-proizoshel-vzryv>
- ⁶ https://t.me/rbc_news/71349
- ⁷ <https://meduza dot io/news/2023/04/02/interfaks-v-peterburge-zaderzhana-podozrevaemaya-po-delu-ob-ubiystve-voenkora-vladlena-tatarskogo>
- ⁸ <https://t.me/MariaVladimirovnaZakharova/5126>
- ⁹ <https://t.me/tikandelaki/14779>
- ¹⁰ <https://t.me/margaritasimonyan/12806>
- ¹¹ <https://t.me/strelkovii/4388>
- ¹² https://t.me/concordgroup_official/678
- ¹³ https://twitter.com/Podolyak_M/status/1642571186293858304
- ¹⁴ <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/wagner-group-bloggers-field-guide/>
- ¹⁵ <https://t.me/vladlentatarsky/16515>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-29>
- ¹⁷ <https://smotrim dot ru/brand/69232>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-orvP4Q7sc>; <https://rutube dot ru/video/4ffe9cb95217642dc60712228a72f8a2/>; <https://rutube dot ru/video/80c57b5570fef5394b2981c93684089c/>; <https://rutube dot ru/video/4ffe9cb95217642dc60712228a72f8a2/>; <https://rutube dot ru/video/c2e73468f48064b1d27cfc42c91a3dda/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FizdFwONRPO>
- ¹⁸ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-26-2023>
- ¹⁹ <https://www.severreal.org/a/v-peterburge-pri-vzryve-v-kafe-pogib-voenkora-vladlen-tatarskiy/32346087.html>
- ²⁰ <https://twitter.com/WarMonitors/status/1642641229564325888>
- ²¹ <https://t.me/bbbreaking/152011>
- ²² <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-23-2023>; <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Offensive%20Campaign%20Assessment%2C%20March%2013%2C%202023.pdf>
- ²³ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-18-2023>
- ²⁴ <https://t.me/rybar/45375>
- ²⁵ <https://t.me/rybar/45375>; <https://t.me/rybar/45373>; <https://t.me/holmogortalks/28131>
- ²⁶ <https://t.me/m0sc0wcalling/22272>
- ²⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0gCzRisYpJfpPj5WWCbFjYCV5XHGwn4p8Kq319152SqC9XedEGWfuYmGSZ9Sp6f48l>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0gCzRisYpJfpPj5WWCbFjYCV5XHGwn4p8Kq319152SqC9XedEGWfuYmGSZ9Sp6f48l>; <https://t.me/wargonzo/11721>; https://t.me/grey_zone/17998; <https://t.me/sashakots/39144>
- ²⁸ <https://t.me/wargonzo/11721>; https://t.me/grey_zone/17998; <https://t.me/sashakots/39144>
- ²⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0gCzRisYpJfpPj5WWCbFjYCV5XHGwn4p8Kq319152SqC9XedEGWfuYmGSZ9Sp6f48l>; <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02MjCgquKZhGrxYzrQ2i9Hr61VsWoaupfyjstE8gmwMBv77BGKEvwsa83LmxpZ3o3Dl>; <https://t.me/readovkanews/55951>; <https://t.me/wargonzo/11721>
- ³⁰ <https://www.tiktok.com/@www.tiktok.com.badboy67/video/7217073078667316486>; https://twitter.com/bayraktar_1love/status/1642240653332566018; <https://twitter.com/GeoConfirmed/status/1642280032109228038>;
- ³¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0gCzRisYpJfpPj5WWCbFjYCV5XHGwn4p8Kq319152SqC9XedEGWfuYmGSZ9Sp6f48l>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02MjCgquKZhGrxYzrQ2i9Hr61VsWoaupfyjstE8gmwMBv77BGKEvwsa83LmxpZ3o3Dl>; <https://t.me/wargonzo/11721>

³² <https://armyinform dot com.ua/2023/04/02/na-doneczkomu-napryamku-vorog-vidstupyv-iz-deyakyh-pozyczij/>

³³ <https://t.me/m0sc0wcalling/22249>; <https://meduza dot io/news/2023/04/02/vsu-obstrelyali-lokomotivnoe-depo-v-melitopole-shest-chelovek-raneny>; https://t.me/ivan_fedorov_melitopol/1634; https://t.me/ivan_fedorov_melitopol/1635;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-28-2023>;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-29-2023>;

<https://t.me/readovkanews/55970>; <https://t.me/readovkanews/55968>; <https://t.me/readovkanews/55966>

³⁴ <https://twitter.com/DefenceHQ/status/1642407117049954307>

³⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-april-1-2023>

³⁶ https://t.me/miroshnik_r/10905; https://t.me/miroshnik_r/10904

³⁷ https://t.me/miroshnik_r/10905

³⁸ https://t.me/sons_fatherland/10050; <https://lugansk-news dot ru/society/2023/02/01/43376.html>

³⁹ http://web.archive.org/web/20221113210635/https://t.me/miroshnik_r