Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 11, 2023

Riley Bailey, Kateryna Stepanenko, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan

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Click <u>here</u> 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.

Ukrainian military officials and Russian pro-war nationalist voices are downplaying Russia's ability to launch a sweeping large-scale offensive in Donetsk Oblast in the current circumstances of the Russian Armed Forces. Representative of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR), Andriy Chernyak, stated that Russia does not have the resources necessary to launch a large-scale offensive operation on February 24 to coincide with the anniversary of Russia's 2022 invasion.¹ Chernyak noted that Russians are preparing to intensify their attacks in eastern Ukraine in the next few weeks and are currently searching for weak spots in Ukrainian defenses. ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have regained the initiative on the Svatove-Kreminna line but that the offensive has not yet reached its full tempo.² Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson, Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty, also noted that the Russian leadership had ordered the capture of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts' administrative borders and said that the grinding Russian operations in Bakhmut are a "symbol" of Russia's inability to conduct rapid and powerful offensive operations."³

Russian milbloggers continue to appear demoralized at the Kremlin's prospects for executing a major offensive. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commander Alexander Khodakovsky questioned why Russian forces are wasting their limited resources on small-scale grinding advances rather than accumulating combat force to launch larger-scale offensives.⁴ Another milblogger amplified Khodakovsky's concern, accusing Russian presidential administration officials of creating unattainable expectations for Russian offensives.⁵

Russian forces' reported culmination and tactical failures around Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast, have likely further weakened the Russian ultranationalist community's belief that Russian forces are able to launch a decisive offensive operation. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that Russian forces failed to quickly advance in the first days of their offensive to capture Vuhledar and that Russian forces had lost the initiative by the end of January due to Ukrainian forces' rapid transfer of reserves to the area.⁶ The milblogger made his assessment that the Russian offensive to capture Vuhledar has likely culminated in response to viral footage showing Ukrainian forces destroying a disorderly column of Russian mechanized forces in the Vuhledar area.⁷ Russian milbloggers seized on the footage to criticize the Russian military command for repeating the same failures that have plagued the Russian military throughout the war in Ukraine, with one prominent milblogger arguing that such incidents illustrate that the Russian army is unable to conduct an offensive along the entire Donetsk front.⁸

The disparity between the limited but significant Russian advances in the Bakhmut area and the lack of meaningful advances elsewhere in Ukraine may support milblogger and Ukrainian observations that Russian forces are unable to secure rapid advances through traditional mechanized maneuver warfare. The Russian military command is deploying its most elite units to the Bakhmut area in smaller formations using urban infiltration tactics, according to the limited footage of Russian tactics in the area that ISW has observed. These tactics seem to be resulting in significant tactical Russian advances in the Bakhmut area that could lead to operational gains if Ukrainian forces choose to withdraw from Bakhmut. Russian offensive operations elsewhere in Donetsk Oblast and along the Svatove-Kreminna line have resulted in marginal advances without operational significance thus far. ISW has observed limited footage of Russian tactics in areas separate from the Bakhmut effort that suggests that Russian forces are engaging in more traditional mechanized maneuver warfare tactics with regular, not elite, motorized rifle, naval infantry, and tank elements. All the formations so far observed were rendered combat-ineffective in earlier phases of the war and

have very likely been reconstituted with mobilized personnel. The Russian military appears to have been unable to prepare its mobilized personnel to conduct effective mechanized offensive operations in the short period of time since their call-ups, as ISW forecasted. The lack of adequate vehicles, ammunition, and other materiel is likely contributing to the ineffectiveness of Russian mechanized maneuver tactics thus far. The Russian military is unlikely to be able to scale its approach from the Bakhmut area to the wider theater because the tactics it is using in Bakhmut are more suited to dense urban environments and because Russian forces lack the number of elite formations needed to conduct a larger offensive in eastern Ukraine in the same fashion. ISW's assessment regarding the prospects for future Russian mechanized offensive operations is offered with low confidence due to the limited available footage depicting Russian military tactics across the entire front line.

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is trying to salvage his declining influence in Russia as the Kremlin continues to sideline him and his mercenaries. Prigozhin attempted to improve the declining reputation of his Wagner mercenaries in an interview with a prominent Kremlin-affiliated milblogger Semyon Pegov (known under the alias Wargonzo) on February 10. Prigozhin responded to a series of questions about Wagner controversies such as high casualties and ineffectiveness of recruited convicts, execution of deserters, treatment of recruited forces as cannon fodder, Prigozhin's harsh criticism of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and his supposed political aspirations, and Wagner mercenaries bearing "symbols of the Third Reich" despite fighting to "denazify" Ukraine. Prigozhin notably confirmed that Wagner has stopped recruitment in prisons because of the expiration of an agreement permitting such recruitment with an unspecified agency – likely the Russian MoD. Prigozhin falsely denied ever criticizing the Russian conventional military and inaccurately presented his critiques as similar to the commonly expressed frustrations among Russian milbloggers regarding poor communications between the Russian military command and Russian units, as well as professionalization efforts that have been widely criticized. Prigozhin also denied having political aspirations and attacked his long-standing enemy St. Petersburg Governor Alexander Beglov.

The Kremlin is continuing to dim Prigozhin's star by depriving him of the right to recruit in prisons and by targeting his influence in the information space. In addition to the Wargonzo interview, a Wagner-affiliated milblogger obtained a document that outlines rules for covering the war in Ukraine with explicit requirements to refrain from mentioning Wagner and Prigozhin in the media. The document also calls on media officials and milbloggers to refrain from praising Deputy Commander of the Russian Joint Grouping of Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergei Surovikin, who is reportedly affiliated with Wagner. The milblogger noted that he is not sure about the authenticity of the document, but the Russian MoD and the Kremlin had already been deliberately avoiding mentioning Wagner and Prigozhin as ISW has previously observed.

Prigozhin likely attempted to deflect attention from his controversies by undercutting the Kremlin's unrealistic goals for the war in Ukraine. Prigozhin forecasted that it would take Russian forces up to two years to reach the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders and three years to advance to the Dnipro River from the east. Prigozhin added that Russian society would need to be drastically militarized for the Kremlin to reach the English Channel, likely either hyperbolizing Russia's aims of destroying NATO or referring to the Cold War-era Soviet war plans aimed at conducting a rapid blitzkrieg to the Channel coast. Prigozhin likely sought to contribute to the current concern within the Russian information space about the Russian military command's ability to sustain a major offensive in Donetsk Oblast to reestablish his reputation relative to that of the Russian MoD. The Wargonzo interview itself was likely a Kremlin ambush of Prigozhin aimed at calling public attention to Wagner controversies. Prigozhin likely saw this interview as an opportunity to elevate his name but instead found himself on the defensive throughout.

Prigozhin's criticism of the Kremlin's military campaign resembles the rhetorical approach of the former Russian militant Igor Girkin. Girkin had previously assisted the Kremlin by leading proxy armed formations in Crimea and Donbas in 2014 until the Kremlin deprived him of any influence following his surrender of Slovyansk in July 2014. Girkin became an embittered critic of the Kremlin and the Russian military command while seeking to rehabilitate his reputation in extremist Russian nationalist circles. Prigozhin's

uncharacteristically nihilistic forecast about Russian offensive prospects closely mirrors Girkin's forecasts, and it is possible that Prigozhin is also turning into a bitter zealot who is losing his ability to leverage his parallel military to obtain political influence.¹⁶ If the current Russian offensive stalls rapidly, on the other hand, the star of the conventional Russian military may once again wane, possibly re-opening a path for Prigozhin to regain significance and opportunities.

Russian forces targeted southern Ukraine with air, missile, and aerial and maritime drone strikes overnight on February 10-11. Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted 20 of 24 Russian UAVs and one Kh-101 missile overnight.¹⁷ Russian forces chiefly targeted energy infrastructure in Zaporizhzhia, Mykolaiv, Dnipro, Kryryi Rih, and Khmelnytskyi cities.¹⁸ Geolocated footage shows that Russian forces used a naval drone to strike the Zatoka road and rail bridge in Odesa Oblast (28km south of Odesa City on the Black Sea coast), the first observed instance of Russian forces operating unmanned naval drones.¹⁹ The footage suggests that the bridge may have sustained severe damage, but the true degree of damage is currently unknown. Russian forces also conducted airstrikes against Snake Island, and Head of the Ukrainian Joint Coordination Press Center of the Southern Forces Nataliya Humenyuk suggested that Russian forces conducted these strikes to demonstrate that Russian forces have not forgotten about offensive actions in southern Ukraine.²⁰ ISW continues to assess that Russian forces currently lack the ability to threaten southern Ukraine with a full-scale offensive. The Ukrainian Operational Command South stated that Russian forces are trying to incite panic in the areas bordering Moldova.²¹

Key Takeaways

- Ukrainian military officials and Russian pro-war nationalist voices are downplaying Russia's ability to launch a sweeping large-scale offensive in Donetsk Oblast in the current circumstances of the Russian Armed Forces.
- Russian forces' reported culmination and tactical failures around Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast, have likely further weakened the Russian ultranationalist community's belief that Russian forces are able to launch a decisive military effort.
- The disparity between the limited but significant Russian advances in the Bakhmut area and the lack of meaningful advances elsewhere in Ukraine may support milblogger and Ukrainian observations that Russian forces are unable to secure rapid advances through traditional mechanized maneuver warfare.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is trying to salvage his declining influence in Russia as the Kremlin continues to sideline him and his mercenaries.
- Russian forces targeted southern Ukraine with air, missile, and aerial and maritime drone strikes overnight on February 10-11.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations near Svatove and Kreminna.
- Russian forces continue to prioritize offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast.
- Russian occupation authorities are likely draining the Kakhovka Reservoir north of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.
- Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin confirmed that the Wagner Group stopped recruiting inside Russian prisons due to the expiration of an agreement between the Wagner Group and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1—Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1- Luhansk Oblast (</u>Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and continue offensive operations into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

ISW continues to assess the current Russian most likely course of action (MLCOA) is an imminent offensive effort in Luhansk Oblast and has therefore adjusted the structure of the daily campaign assessments. We will no longer include the Eastern Kharkiv and Western Luhansk Oblast area as part of Ukrainian counteroffensives and will assess this area as a subordinate part of the Russian main effort in Eastern Ukraine. The assessment of Luhansk Oblast as part of the Russian main effort does not preclude the possibility of continued Ukrainian counteroffensive actions here or anywhere else in theater in the future. ISW will report on Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts as they occur.

Russian forces reportedly continued offensive operations northwest of Svatove amidst conflicting claims about Russian advances on February 11. A Russian milblogger claimed that battles near Hryanykivka (53km northwest of Svatove) are ongoing and that Russian forces established control over Dvorichna (55km northwest of Svatove). The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces completely captured Dvorichne (53km northwest of Svatove) on February 10, and it is possible that this milblogger confused the two settlements. Another prominent milblogger argued that it was premature to assess whether Russian forces captured Dvorichne as it is notably far away from Russian positions, but another milblogger noted that this milblogger likely mistook Dvorichne for Dvorichna. Whas not observed visual confirmation that Russian forces are in Dvorichne nor that Russian forces have made any advances closer to Dvorichna. A Russian milblogger also claimed that Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful assault towards Stelmakhivka (15km west of Svatove). Stelmakhivka (15km west of Svatove).

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Kreminna area on February 11. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Kreminna, Shepylove (8km south of Kreminna), and Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna).²⁶ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces are strengthening their grouping of forces in the Kreminna area.²⁷ Footage published on February 10th claims to show Russian elements of the 98th Guards Airborne Division in the Kreminna area.²⁸ Geolocated footage published on February 10 indicates that Russian forces likely secured marginal advances west of Shepylove.²⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted an assault from Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna) in the direction of Zarichne (17km west of Kreminna).³⁰

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2—Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continue to prioritize offensive operations in Donetsk Oblast. Ukrainian Commander in Chief General Valery Zaluzhnyi told US Joint Chief of Staff Chairman General Mark Milley on February 11 that Russian forces conduct up to 50 attacks daily in the direction of Donetsk City and conduct constant attacks around Bakhmut.³¹ Zaluzhnyi stated that fierce fighting continues around Vuhledar and Marinka and that Ukrainian forces have managed to regain previously lost positions in Donetsk Oblast.³² Zalzuhnyi added that effective artillery is the key to battlefield success in these areas of the frontline and noted that this requires both weapons and ammunition.³³

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on February 11. Ukrainian Eastern Grouping of Forces spokesperson Colonel Serhiy Cherevaty stated that there were 39 combat engagements between Russian and Ukrainian forces in the Bakhmut area in the past 24 hours.³⁴ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut, Krasna Hora (6km north of Bakhmut), and Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut).35 Geolocated footage published on February 11 shows Russian forces walking freely in the eastern part of Krasna Hora and likely indicates that Ukrainian forces withdrew from the settlement. 36 Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces encircled Ukrainian forces in Krasna Hora and that Wagner Group fighters currently hold positions in the southeastern part of Paraskoviivka (7km north of Bakhmut).³⁷ A Russian milblogger also claimed that Wagner Group elements conducted assaults in the direction of Fedorivka (18km north of Bakhmut).³⁸ Geolocated footage posted on February 11 indicates that Wagner Group fighters likely secured marginal advances in the northeast outskirts of Bakhmut.³⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted assaults in the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut. 40 Geolocated footage published on February 11 shows a destroyed bridge over the Siverskyi Donets Canal along the To504 highway west of Ivanivske, and a Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces destroyed the bridge to set conditions for a withdrawal from Bakhmut.⁴¹ Ukrainian forces are unlikely to have destroyed the bridge and likely intend to maintain critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) into Bakhmut as they continue to defend the city. The Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia claimed that the DNR 132nd Brigade of the 1st Army Corps made unspecified advances in the direction of Toretsk (23km southwest of Bakhmut).42

Russian forces are highly unlikely to launch a coordinated effort to capture Siversk in the coming weeks, contrary to previous claims from Russian milbloggers. Prominent Russian milbloggers recently responded to Wagner Group advances north of Soledar (20km south of Siversk) and Russian claims about the capture of Bilohorivka, Luhansk Oblast (13km northeast of Siversk) by suggesting that Russian forces were launching a complimentary effort to encircle Siversk.⁴³ ISW assessed that Russian forces would need to launch a far more concerted effort in the direction of Siversk from the north, east, and south to drive on the settlement.⁴⁴ ISW has observed the Wagner Group's offensive operations north of Soledar have waned in previous days, suggesting that these operations were in service of the overall Russian effort to encircle Bakhmut and not orientated towards Siversk. Russian milbloggers have also not mentioned a Russian offensive to take Siversk since Russian claims about the capture of Bilohorivka proved to be false.⁴⁵

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the western outskirts of Donetsk City on February 11. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Paraskoviivka (36km southwest of Avdiivka).⁴⁶ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted assaults near Krasnohorivka (21km southwest of Avdiivka) and Avdiivka itself.⁴⁷

Russian forces reportedly continued offensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast on February 11. A Russian milblogger claimed that fierce fighting is ongoing in the dacha area south and southeast of Vuhledar (30km southwest of Donetsk City).⁴⁸ Geolocated footage published on February 11 shows the aftermath of a Russian thermobaric artillery strike near Vuhledar.⁴⁹ Thermobaric artillery systems are military district level assets and may suggest that Russian forces are prioritizing operations around Vuhledar. A Russian milblogger also claimed that Russian forces conducted a ground attack towards Prechystivka (35km southwest of Donetsk City).⁵⁰

<u>Supporting Effort—Southern Axis</u> (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces did not conduct any confirmed ground attacks in southern Ukraine on February 11.⁵¹ Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov claimed that Ukrainian forces increased their sabotage and reconnaissance operations along the Zaporizhia Oblast frontline.⁵² Rogov also expressed continued concern that Ukrainian forces are preparing for a possible future counteroffensive.

Russian forces are likely draining the Kakhovka Reservoir north of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast. *NPR* reported that Russian forces deliberately opened the sluice gates of the Kakhovka Reservoir immediately after they blew the dam bridge during the withdrawal from west (right) bank Kherson Oblast on November 11.⁵³ *NPR* noted that the water level in the Kakhovka Reservoir dropped from 16.1 meters on December 1, 2022 to 14.1 meters on February 6. The Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration reported that water levels in the Kakhovka Reservoir are decreasing uncontrollably and will threaten the security of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP)'s ability to draw water from the reservoir for its reactor cooling systems if the water level dips below 13.2 meters.⁵⁴ International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director-General Rafael Grossi corroborated this statement, noting that the current water level does not pose a threat to the ZNPP but may threaten the ZNPP's security if the water level continues to drop.⁵⁵

Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces continue to accumulate manpower in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. Kherson Oblast Military Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated that Russian forces continue to bring in manpower to support law enforcement activities and are not preparing for an offensive.⁵⁶ ISW continues to assess that Russian forces in southern Ukraine, particularly in east bank Kherson Oblast, lack the necessary force concentration to attempt a full-scale offensive.

<u>Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts</u> (Russian objective: Expand combat power without conducting general mobilization)

Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin confirmed on February 11 that Wagner Group stopped recruiting inside Russian prisons due to the expiration of an arrangement between Wagner and likely the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).⁵⁷ Prigozhin stated that unspecified military detachments outside of his jurisdiction – likely referring to Russia's conventional armed forces – will continue convict recruitment efforts.⁵⁸ A Wagner Groupaffiliated Russian milblogger also claimed that the Russian MoD is increasing its efforts to recruit inside Russian prisons.⁵⁹ The United Kingdom MoD assessed on February 11 that the increasing conflict between the Russian MoD and Wagner Group was likely the main factor in the termination of the Wagner Group-MoD agreement regarding prison recruitment.⁶⁰ Prigozhin's influence and appeal will likely continue to decline as the Russian MoD continues measures to undercut Wagner Group forces' battlefield effectiveness, as ISW has previously reported.⁶¹

Tensions between Russian irregular forces are increasing as Russian military command attempts to integrate mobilized soldiers into Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) units, which have operated semi-independently since 2014. Relatives of mobilized soldiers from Tatarstan published an appeal to the governor of Tatarstan claiming that the Russian military command wants to send their relatives' unit back to combat even though DNR commanders mistreat mobilized soldiers and use them like cannon fodder. The Russian MoD transferred the unit from the front line on February 8 following the personnel's own complaints. Mobilized soldiers from Kaliningrad Oblast complained to the governor of Kaliningrad Oblast that DNR commanders attempted to send them to conduct a ground assault with no prior preparation. Tuvan Republic Head Vladislav Khovalyg stated on February 8 that the Russian MoD agreed to transfer a group of Tuvan mobilized soldiers from the frontlines after they also complained that DNR soldiers harmed and shot at them, as ISW reported on February 6.66

Russian authorities opened a criminal case against an Omsk resident on February 10 under laws on the intentional destruction or damage of property for an unsuccessful arson attack against an Omsk City military recruitment center.⁶⁷ Russian authorities typically levy charges of terrorism for similar acts. A Russian activist group claimed on February 10 that Russian authorities added a Kazan resident to the Russian Federal Monitoring

Service (Rosfinmonitoring) register of "terrorists and extremists" following his December 19 detention under accusations of planning a terrorist attack against a military registration and enlistment office in Stavropol Krai.⁶⁸

<u>Activity in Russian-occupied Areas</u> (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of and annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Marat Khusnullin discussed the socio-economic development of occupied Ukraine with Kherson and Zaporizhia oblast occupation authorities on February 11.⁶⁹ Kherson Oblast occupation administration head Vladimir Saldo and Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration head Yevgeny Balitsky claimed that occupation authorities plan to focus on intensive construction of infrastructure and industrial enterprises and reviving the Kherson Oblast agro-industrial complex.⁷⁰ Saldo insisted that landowners who left Kherson Oblast must return and work by an unspecified date or occupation authorities will redistribute their land.⁷¹

Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai claimed on February 11 that Ukrainian partisans destroyed an automated railway control station near Shchastia, Luhansk Oblast on a section of the railway connection between Shchastia and Starobilsk.⁷² This attack may impede Russian forces' ability to transfer forces, equipment, and supplies within rear areas of Russian-occupied Luhansk Oblast.

<u>Significant activity in Belarus</u> (ISW assesses that a Russian or Belarusian attack into northern Ukraine in early 2023 is extraordinarily unlikely and has thus restructured this section of the update. It will no longer include counter-indicators for such an offensive.

ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarusian military activity in Belarus, but these are not indicators that Russian and Belarusian forces are preparing for an imminent attack on Ukraine from Belarus. ISW will revise this text and its assessment if it observes any unambiguous indicators that Russia or Belarus is preparing to attack northern Ukraine.)

Nothing significant to report.

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

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