Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, March 5, 2023

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March 5, 8:25pm ET

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ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, March 5. This report analyzes the ongoing Battle for Bakhmut and Russian prospects for further offensive efforts. Ukrainian forces may be conducting a limited fighting withdrawal in eastern Bakhmut and are continuing to inflict high casualties against the advancing mixed Russian forces. Russian milbloggers have also lowered their expectations of Russian forces' ability to launch additional offensives, which would likely culminate whether or not Russian forces actually capture Bakhmut. If Russian forces manage to secure Bakhmut they could then attempt renewed pushes towards one or both of Kostyantynivka or Slovyansk but would struggle with endemic personnel and equipment constraints. The likely imminent culmination of the Russian offensive around Bakhmut before or after its fall, the already culminated Russian offensive around Vuhledar, and the stalling Russian offensive in Luhansk Oblast are likely setting robust conditions for a future Ukrainian counteroffensive.

Ukrainian forces are likely conducting a limited tactical withdrawal in Bakhmut, although it is still too early to assess Ukrainian intentions concerning a complete withdrawal from the city. Ukrainian forces may be withdrawing from their positions on the eastern bank of the Bakhmutka River given recent geolocated footage of the destruction of the railway bridge over the river in northeastern Bakhmut on March 3.1 Russian war correspondents and milbloggers claimed that Russian forces captured eastern, northern, and southern parts of Bakhmut on March 5 and claimed to be reporting from positions in eastern Bakhmut, but ISW cannot independently verify these claims at this time.² Geolocated footage showed that Wagner Group forces continued to make advances in northeastern Bakhmut and advanced near the Stupky railway station on March 5.3 A Ukrainian serviceman told a Ukrainian outlet that Russian forces have vet to cross the Bakhmutka River into central Bakhmut as of March 4, and Russian milbloggers claimed that the Wagner Group pushed Ukrainian positions back to central Bakhmut.⁴ It is unclear if Ukrainian forces are planning to hold positions on the western bank of the Bakhmutka River.

The Ukrainian defense of Bakhmut remains strategically sound as it continues to consume Russian manpower and equipment as long as Ukrainian forces do not suffer excessive casualties. Ukrainian forces are unlikely to withdraw from Bakhmut all at once and may pursue a gradual fighting withdrawal to exhaust Russian forces through continued urban warfare. Russian forces are unlikely to quickly secure significant territorial gains when conducting urban warfare, which usually favors the defender and can allow Ukrainian forces to inflict high casualties on advancing Russian units—even as Ukrainian forces are actively withdrawing. The Bakhmut city center is located on the western bank of the Bakhmutka River, and Russian forces will need to fight through the area if they are unable to advance directly north or south of Bakhmut to the west of the city center. Such urban conditions and river features may benefit Ukrainian forces if Ukrainian forces are able to hold the line from Khromove (a settlement on Bakhmut's northwestern outskirts) south to the To504 Bakhmut-Kostyantynivka highway. Russian milbloggers noted that Ukrainian forces are retaining the ability to defend Khromove and are continuing to repel Russian attacks on Ivanivske and on the To504 highway to the south. The Ukrainian defense of positions near Khromove and on the To504 could force Russian forces to fight through the urban terrain of central Bakhmut, which could impose significant delays and losses on Russian forces and accelerate the culmination of Russia's offensive. Urban warfare in Bakhmut may further degrade already exhausted Russian mixed forces in a fashion similar to that caused by Ukraine's fighting withdrawal from the Severodonetsk-Lysychansk line, which effectively ended Russian offensive operations in Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts in the summer of 2022.

The Russian military's attritional campaign to capture Bakhmut has likely prompted Russian milbloggers to adopt more realistic expectations for further Russian operations in Ukraine. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) commander and Russian milblogger Alexander Khodakovsky questioned whether Russian forces are prepared for potential Ukrainian counteroffensive operations after possibly "getting carried away by Bakhmut [and] Vuhledar" and suggested that Russian forces may have set conditions for Ukrainian counteroffensives by heavily expending combat power and resources on these operations.⁶ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces would likely have to conduct a short operational pause following the potential capture of Bakhmut.7 Another prominent Russian milblogger offered a more ambitious assessment that Russian forces would take Kostvantynivka by the end of spring 2023 and launch an offensive on the Slovvansk-Kramatorsk agglomeration between the summer and fall of 2023.8 Even this relatively ambitious assessment contrasts with previous high expectations from Russian milbloggers, many of whom claimed that the entire Ukrainian frontline around Bakhmut would collapse and Ukrainian forces would fall back to Kramatorsk and Slovyansk following the Russian capture of the small settlement of Soledar northeast of Bakhmut on January 11.9 Russian milbloggers similarly shifted to more conservative expectations focused on the immediate capture of specific settlements as the highly attritional campaign to capture Lysychansk and Severodonetsk in the summer of 2022 progressed and the overall offensive culminated. 10 Nine months of highly attritional, slow Russian advances in the Bakhmut area have likely heavily informed these increasingly realistic and constrained Russian milblogger assessments.

The Russian military will nevertheless likely fail to meet Russian milbloggers' expectations despite these more realistic assessments. The timeline offered by even the most ambitious assessment suggests that Russian campaigning to capture all of Donetsk Oblast would be a years-long effort. Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin similarly assessed that it would take Russian forces up to two years to reach the Donetsk Oblast administrative borders. Russian forces currently do not have the manpower and equipment necessary to sustain offensive operations at scale for a renewed offensive toward Kramatorsk and Slovyansk, let alone for a years-long campaign to capture all of Donetsk Oblast. Meaningful Russian offensives around Vuhledar or elsewhere in western Donetsk Oblast are also highly doubtful. Russia will have to mobilize considerably more personnel and fundamentally transform its military industry to be able to support such operations. The Russian military's likely continued failure to achieve a decisive victory in Donetsk Oblast will likely draw increasing ire from Russia's ultranationalist pro-war community.

The Russian offensive to capture Bakhmut will likely culminate whether Russian forces capture the city or not, and the Russian military will likely struggle to maintain any subsequent offensive operations for some months. The conventional Russian military recently massed and lost significant numbers of mobilized personnel for a since-culminated offensive push near Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast. Russian "major" offensives in the Kupyansk, Svatove, and Kreminna directions in Luhansk Oblast are also failing to generate any significant successes on the frontlines.¹² The Russian military relied on Wagner Group forces to make any advances in the nine-month effort for Bakhmut and has since reinforced Wagner forces in Bakhmut with Russian airborne elements and mobilized personnel.¹³ Russian forces likely lack the capability to further reinforce the Bakhmut area significantly without pulling forces from another area of the front line due to the lack of untapped reserves, with the possible exception of the 2nd Guards Motorized Rifle Division that was last reported in Luhansk but uncommitted to the fighting.¹⁴ The culmination of all these efforts further supports ISW's assessment that Russian forces likely lack the combat power to sustain more than one simultaneous offensive. 15 The Russian effort against Bakhmut does not further the Russian military's operational or strategic battlefield aims, and significant Ukrainian defenses in the surrounding area undermine any tactical significance that capturing Bakhmut likely has for Russian forces. 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.

Endemic personnel and equipment constraints will likely prevent Russian forces from launching another prolonged offensive operation like the Battle for Bakhmut in the coming months. Secretary of the Ukrainian National Security and Defense Council Oleksiy Danilov stated on March 3 that Russian military casualties in Bakhmut equate to one Ukrainian loss per seven Russian losses.¹⁶ White House officials reported on February 17 that the Wagner Group, which has predominantly fought in the Bakhmut area, has suffered 30,000 casualties with about 9,000 fighters killed since the start of the full-scale invasion in Ukraine.¹⁷ It is highly unlikely that Russian forces will be able to sustain grinding human wave attacks following the capture of Bakhmut, and the Kremlin will need to launch another mobilization wave to replenish heavy Russian losses in the area since May 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin has been delaying announcing the second mobilization wave since January and is reportedly doubling down on "quiet mobilization" to avoid generating possible unrest in Russia.¹⁸ The Wagner Group reportedly opened recruitment centers in about 30 cities as of March 5.19 These recruitment efforts will take several months at least, however, causing delays that will likely deprive Russia of the initiative and may support Ukraine's ability to conduct counteroffensives. Ukrainian and Western officials have noted that Russia continues to face ammunition shortages, and the struggling Russian defense industrial base cannot remedy such shortages in the near term.²⁰

The Russian Armed Forces will continue to rely on irregular formations in further offensive operations in the coming months. The Russian military command largely relied on Wagner convict forces to carry out costly infantry frontal assaults, with Western intelligence officials and prison advocacy groups estimating that 40,000 to 50,000 convicts joined the Wagner Group.²¹ Wagner has since started using its elite elements after losing much of its convict force.²² It is unclear how combat-capable Wagner forces will be after the culmination of Russian operations around Bakhmut. Wagner forces may thus also require significant reconstitution. Russian conventional forces' reliance on Wagner to conduct assaults and make advances in Bakhmut depleted a key mitigation for the limitations of the conventional Russian military.

Russian forces have previously relied on unconventional forces from the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic (DNR/LNR) militias, Chechen units, and the Wagner Group in attritional campaigns to capture Mariupol, Severodonetsk, and Lysychansk, although the campaign to capture Bakhmut has represented a major inflection in the Russian military's reliance on such forces.²³ Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed on March 4 that Russian forces would fail to seize Bakhmut and the front line would collapse if Wagner forces stopped fighting.²⁴ Prigozhin announced on February 9 that Wagner had stopped recruiting from prisons while the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reportedly incorporated convicts into conventional and LNR Militia formations.²⁵ ISW previously assessed that the MoD's efforts to restrict Wagner's force generation efforts could indicate that the MoD is prioritizing its power struggle against Prigozhin over achieving Russia's war aims.²⁶

Russian forces would have the choice of two diverging lines of advance after capturing Bakhmut but would likely struggle to sustain offensive operations and make any significant gains. Russian forces could attempt to advance west along the To504 highway to Kostyantynivka or northwest along the E40 to Slovyansk, but heavy Ukrainian fortifications in both directions would likely inflict high casualties against attacking Russian forces and force the effort to culminate prematurely. These highways lead away from each other on diverging axes that are not mutually supporting, and Russian forces' best chance at success would be to prioritize one of these lines of effort. Russian forces would likely face similar if not worse personnel and equipment shortages compared with those that hindered their efforts against Bakhmut and other axes, however. Russian forces would likely have to choose between relaunching an offensive effort towards Kostyantynivka or Slovyansk at a great cost they cannot afford to pay, or resting and reconstituting, thereby setting favorable conditions for a Ukrainian counteroffensive.

It is not clear if Russian forces intend to resume offensives near Vuhledar, and it is highly unlikely that Russian forces would advance far enough in this direction to support operations elsewhere in any case. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on March 5 that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu instructed Eastern Military District (EMD) commander Colonel General Rustam Muradov to take Vuhledar at any cost, amid conflict between the two over the lack of progress and significant losses in the area, supporting ISW's previous assessment that Shoigu may be evaluating Muradov's continued suitability as EMD commander.²⁷ The conflict between Russia's top military commanders will likely compound the effects of catastrophic personnel and manpower losses that are constraining Russian operational capabilities in the Vuhledar area.²⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that commanders of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade of the Pacific Fleet are refusing to conduct offensive operations in the area and that Russian forces have lost control over an irregular Cossack battalion formation near Vuhledar.²⁹ Russian forces have reportedly reconstituted the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade at least seven times since the start of the invasion, and the combat effectiveness of this committed formation is likely negligible.³⁰ Russian forces are highly unlikely to be able to conduct any concentrated offensive effort with the current demoralized and degraded forces in the Vuhledar area. If Shoigu did instruct Muradov to resume offensives on Vuhledar, Muradov would likely require new manpower and equipment reserves to follow through on these instructions. ISW assessed that Shoigu likely met with Muradov on March 4 to assess the possibility of resuming offensives around Vuhledar, although it still is not evident whether Shoigu has decided to provide Muradov with the necessary resources to do so.31

Resumed Russian offensives near Vuhledar are highly unlikely to support Russian offensive operations elsewhere in Donetsk Oblast. Vuhledar is about 24km away from Marinka and Kurakhove as well as the N15 highway that Ukrainian forces use as a ground line of communication (GLOC) for operations in western Donetsk Oblast. Russian forces would need to advance 24km to support operations along the western outskirts of Donetsk City in the direction of Marinka or to threaten rear Ukrainian positions in uncontested areas of Donetsk Oblast in the direction of Kurkahove. Russian forces failed to advance four kilometers from Mykilske and Pavlivka to Vuhledar in the recent three-week offensive to capture the settlement. Russian forces have not made advances anywhere near 24km in Ukraine since the first months of the full-scale invasion.

The likely imminent culmination of the Russian offensive around Bakhmut, the already culminated Russian offensive around Vuhledar, and the stalling Russian offensive in Luhansk Oblast are likely setting robust conditions for Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. ISW previously assessed that Russian forces had regained the initiative in Ukraine as of February 8, but Russian forces have since failed to capitalize on that initiative to secure any operationally significant gains.³² Russian forces will likely lose the initiative in Ukraine within the coming months due to the likely culmination of their three main offensive efforts. Ukrainian forces previously seized the initiative after the culmination of the Russian offensive to capture Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in July of 2022 and conducted counteroffensives operations a few months later that resulted in the liberation of large swathes of territory in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts. The culmination of Russia's current three offensive efforts will likely allow Ukrainian forces to launch counteroffensives anywhere along the frontline that they deem best suited for such operations. The high manpower and equipment costs that the Russian military has spent in failed offensive operations in Luhansk and western Donetsk oblasts and on the operationally insignificant city of Bakhmut will benefit these likely upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensives.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on March 5:

- The Ukrainian Air Force Command and Ukrainian news outlet *Defense Express* reported that Russian forces began using new UPAB-1500V aerial bombs against Ukrainian targets.³³
- Russian forces continued to conduct limited ground attacks northwest and south of Kreminna.³⁴
- Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks near Avdiivka and on the western outskirts of Donetsk City.³⁵ A Russian source claimed that Russian forces advanced to Pervomaiske, 8km northwest of Donetsk City.³⁶
- The Ukrainian General Staff continued to report that Russian forces are attempting to create conditions for the transition to an offensive in some areas of the Zaporizhia and Kherson directions.³⁷ ISW has not observed indicators that Russian forces are preparing to launch sustained offensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast or any offensive activity in Kherson Oblast.
- Ukrainian Deputy Prosecutor General Viktoriya Litvinova reported that Russia deported about 16,000 children of whom 307 were able to return to Ukraine.³⁸ The Ukrainian Presidential Commissioner for Human Rights Daria Herasimchuk reported that Russian officials use coercive tactics to separate Ukrainian children from their parents in order to deport them.³⁹

•	Ukrainian First Lady Olena Zelenska reported t investigating 171 cases of sexual assault commit Ukrainian citizens. ⁴⁰	that Ukrainian prosecutors are tted by Russian Forces against

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of March 5, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



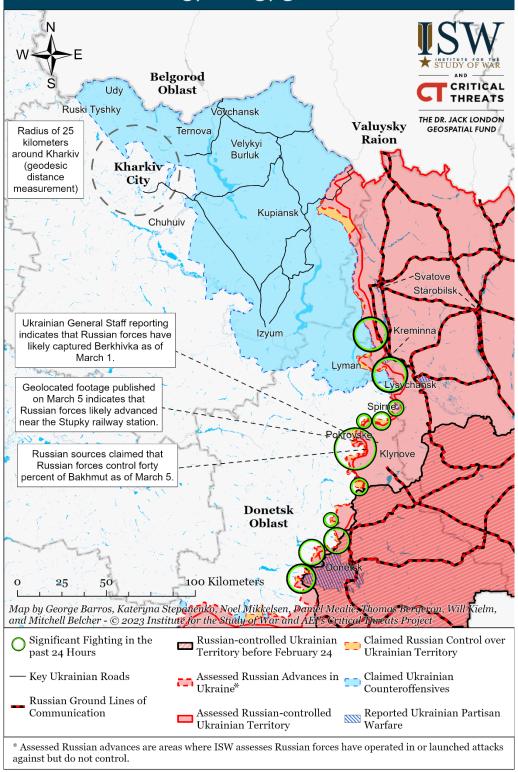
 $^{^*}$ Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

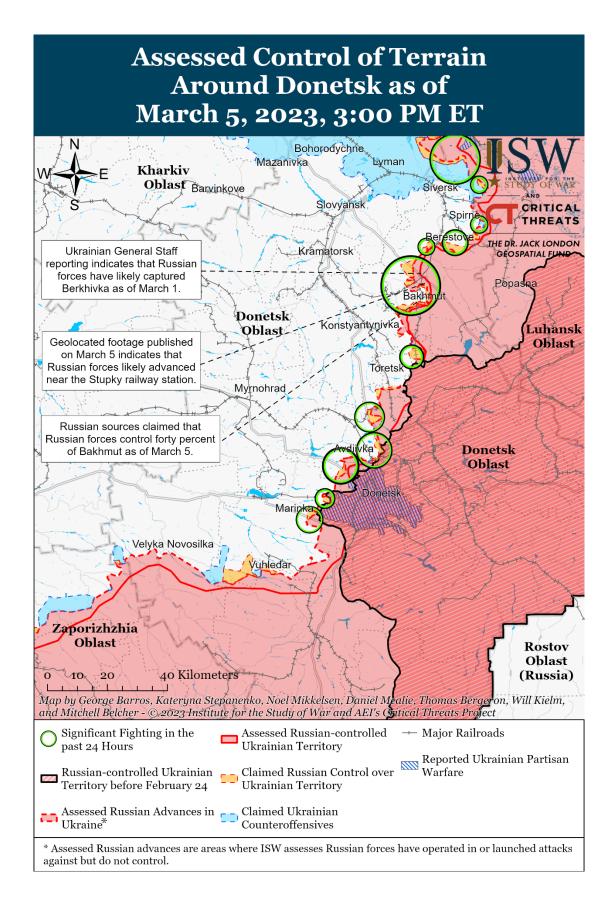
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of March 5, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



against but do not control.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of March 5, 2023, 3:00 PM ET





Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of March 5, 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.

¹⁰ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-4; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-may-21; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-1; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-30;

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https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2023/03/02/war-top-ukraine-spy-says-russia-out-of-militarytools/11310628002/; https://www.wsj.com/articles/russias-munitions-shortages-raise-questions-over-how-long-it-can-continueukraine-war-11669107174

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https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-22;

¹ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-3-2023

² https://t.me/sashakots/38745; https://t.me/milchronicles/1623; https://t.me/epoddubny/15081; https://t.me/epoddubny/15082

³ https://t.me/nm dnr/9967; https://twitter.com/fdov21/status/1632301504311750657

⁴ https://www.cnn.com/europe/live-news/russia-ukraine-war-news-03-04-23/index.html; https://t.me/epoddubny/15081

⁵ https://t.me/boris rozhin/79711; https://t.me/boris rozhin/79771; https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/45845

⁶ https://t.me/aleksandr skif/2606

⁷ https://t.me/vysokygovorit/10931

⁸ https://t.me/boris rozhin/79696

⁹ https://isw.pub/UkrWar011223; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaignassessment-january-17-2023

¹¹ https://dzen.dot.ru/video/watch/63e67fbd7270fb396dc1e99d?share_to=telegram

¹² https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-11-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-4-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-1-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-13-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-10-2023

¹³ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-28-2023; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-28; https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-19-2023;

¹⁴ https://isw.pub/UkrWar021923

¹⁵ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-28-2023;

¹⁶ https://www.ukrinform.dot.net/rubric-ato/3677516-danilov-on-russian-military-losses-near-bakhmut-1-to-7-in-our-favor.html

¹⁷ https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/white-house-wagner-group-has-suffered-over-30000-casualties-ukraine-2023-02-17/ https://www.voanews.com/a/wagner-group-s-use-of-convicts-in-ukraine-echoes-stalinist-tactics/6932903.html

¹⁸ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-update-february-5-2023

¹⁹ https://t.me/vysokygovorit/10934

²⁰ https://gur.gov dot ua/content/u-rosii-zakinchatsia-instrumenty-viiny.html;

²¹ https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/12/europe/wagner-convicts-eastern-ukraine-pleitgen-intl/index.html

²² https://www.voanews.com/a/wagner-group-s-use-of-convicts-in-ukraine-echoes-stalinist-tactics/6932903.html

²³ https://isw.pub/RusCampaignApr20; https://isw.pub/RusCampaignJune21; https://isw.pub/UkraineConflictUpdate11

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³⁴ https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/9074; https://t.me/serhiy hayday/9581; https://t.me/notes veterans/8345; https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02Sd8dbuKmYrpZvdQoxyXoTygu1SvkGV9HLVDGFjGJn1MJGQ6Lyc5Uidds44 Eqs1kLl;

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²⁴ https://twitter.com/wartranslated/status/1632148708748935168; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EelfGtZEB1o&t=125s

²⁵ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-9-2023; https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/14/europe/russian-army-prisoners-conscripts-ukraine-intl/index.html

²⁶ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-february-14-2023

²⁷ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-4-2023

²⁸ <u>https://isw.pub/UkrWar03012023</u>; <u>https://isw.pub/UkrWar021323</u>;

³⁰ https://sprotyv.mod.gov dot ua/2023/02/27/rosiyany-trymayut-trupy-svoyih-soldativ-na-skladah-aby-ne-vyplachuvaty-groshi-ridnym-spovid-okupanta/; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7VyogLhqX9E&ab_channel=Центрнаціональногоспротиву

³¹ https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-4-2023

³² https://isw.pub/UkrWar020823

³³ https://defence-ua dot

³⁸ <u>https://suspilne</u> dot media/404612-rosiani-deportuvali-blizko-16-tisac-ukrainskih-ditej-zastupnica-genprokurora-viktoria-litvinova/

 $^{^{39}}$ <u>https://suspilne</u> dot media/404612-rosiani-deportuvali-blizko-16-tisac-ukrainskih-ditej-zastupnica-genprokurora-viktoria-litvinova/

⁴⁰ <u>https://suspilne</u> dot media/404252-v-ukraini-zareestrovanij-171-vipadok-seksualnogo-nasilstva-z-boku-vijskovih-rfolena-zelenska/