

# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 22, 2023

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December 22, 2023, 7:30pm 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 see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

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 map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

**Note:** The data cut-off for this product was 2pm ET on December 22. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 23 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

**Ukrainian officials continue to warn that Russia maintains its maximalist objectives and additional goals for territorial conquest in Ukraine, despite recent comments made by Western officials suggesting that Russia is already defeated.** NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated on December 22 that Russian President Vladimir Putin "has lost Ukraine altogether" and can "no longer achieve its war goals," which is a "major strategic defeat."<sup>[1]</sup> Stoltenberg also cautioned against expectations in the West of a rapid end to the war. Stoltenberg's comments echo comments made by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on December 20, wherein Blinken stated that Russia has already failed to achieve its principal objective of erasing and subsuming Ukraine.<sup>[2]</sup> Deputy Chief of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Major General Vadym Skibitskyi, however, also stated on December 22 that even if Russia failed to achieve its operational-strategic objectives in 2023, Putin will simply shift Russia's objectives to the next year, suggesting that it is premature to talk about Russia's complete failure in the war thus far.<sup>[3]</sup> Skibitsky's statement is consistent with ISW's assessment that Russia continues to pursue Putin's maximalist goals in Ukraine and that the current failure of Russian operations in Ukraine thus far is not a permanent condition.<sup>[4]</sup> A Russian source seized on Blinken's comment and similar statements made by Western officials to propagate the narrative that these comments aim to justify reducing Western support for Ukraine.<sup>[5]</sup> Russian information space actors will likely continue to exploit Western statements regarding the failure of Russian operations in 2023 and falsely frame such statements as indicators that Western leaders intend to stop supporting Ukraine.

**Ukraine will very likely receive the first batch of F-16s before the end of 2023.** Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte confirmed on December 22 during a phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky that the Dutch government will prepare an initial 18 F-16 fighter jets for delivery to Ukraine.<sup>[6]</sup> While Rutte did not confirm the timeline for F-16 delivery, a recent Estonian Ministry of Defense strategy document stated that the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and Belgium have already committed to donating F-16s to Ukraine "before the end of the year [2023]."<sup>[7]</sup>

**The Russia Aerospace Forces (VKS) reportedly lost three Su-34 attack aircraft in southern Ukraine between December 21-22.** The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces downed three Su-24 aircraft on December 22 in the southern direction, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian air defenses downed the Russian aircraft in the Kherson direction near Krynky.[8] Russian milbloggers responded to the isolated incident with great concern about Ukraine's air defense capabilities in southern Ukraine.[9] The VKS previously lost two Mi-8 helicopters, a Su-34 bomber, and a Su-35 fighter during an incident in Bryansk Oblast on May 13, 2023, which Russian forces similarly seized on to voice anxiety over Ukrainian air defense capabilities.[10]

**The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) named Russian President Vladimir Putin's close ally and Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, as the individual responsible for the assassination of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.**[11] The *WSJ*, quoting Western intelligence officials and former Russian intelligence sources, reported that Patrushev, with Putin's permission, gave the order to "dispose" of Prigozhin in early August 2023 by planting an explosive on the wing of Prigozhin's jet. ISW had originally assessed on August 23 that Russian forces might have shot down Prigozhin's jet on Putin's orders, but evidence for that assessment was circumstantial, and ISW has no reason to doubt that the sources of the *WSJ* report are more reliable. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov accused the *WSJ* of putting forward a "pulp fiction" conspiracy theory about Prigozhin's death, however.[12]

The *WSJ* reported that Patrushev and other Kremlin officials warned Putin against using parallel armies, but that Putin committed Wagner forces shortly after Russian regular forces failed to accomplish the Kremlin's invasion plan in February 2022. Patrushev reportedly began to warn Putin about Prigozhin's intentions in summer 2022, but Putin reportedly disregarded those concerns as Wagner forces were achieving battlefield successes. ISW previously assessed on March 12, 2023, that Putin allowed Prigozhin to expand the Wagner Group in spring and summer 2022 to avoid ordering an unpopular mobilization after Russian regular forces failed to capture Kyiv and culminated in western Luhansk Oblast.[13] Prigozhin became bolder throughout the summer and early fall of 2022 and started openly criticizing the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the General Staff in hopes of installing pro-Wagner commanders and officials within the Kremlin establishment.[14] ISW has previously observed that Putin encourages competition among different factions within the Kremlin and likely permitted the continuation of conditions in which Prigozhin could attack the Russian MoD to balance Kremlin officials and ensure that different factions competed to please him by accomplishing his stated objectives.[15] Kremlin sources similarly told the *WSJ* that Putin stood by his long-term practice of allowing the feud between Prigozhin and the Russian MoD to continue despite Patrushev's concerns.

A former Russian intelligence officer reported that Putin's relationship with Prigozhin changed after Prigozhin scolded Putin over the Wagner Group's shortage of supplies over a phone call, which Patrushev and other Kremlin officials overheard in October 2022. ISW reported in late October about the Putin-Prigozhin discussion of battlefield realities and observed Putin issuing an oblique warning to Prigozhin on October 5, 2022, in an odd allusion to the Pugachev Rebellion that challenged Catherine the Great's authority in the mid-1770s.[16] Patrushev reportedly seized on the phone call to convince Putin to distance himself from Prigozhin as Prigozhin showed disrespect to Putin's authority – and Patrushev was ultimately successful in influencing Putin to cut communication with Prigozhin by December 2022. Putin's trust in and affinity for Prigozhin may have also declined as Prigozhin failed to

capture Bakhmut before the start of 2023 as he had likely previously promised to do. ISW assessed on March 12, 2023, that Putin likely allowed the Russian MoD to replace Wagner in Bakhmut in early January because Wagner had failed to capture Bakhmut by late December 2022. In March 2023, ISW observed Prigozhin publicly entertaining a claim that Patrushev and Putin were planning to "neutralize" Wagner and Prigozhin given that there would be nothing remaining of Wagner in April or May 2023.[17] The claim that Prigozhin amplified also included Patrushev's observation that Prigozhin would try to "unite the former and remaining active Wagner fighters under a far-fetched pretext," arm them, and "send them to the territory of Russia in order to seize power in the regions bordering Ukraine with a possible advance inland" if Russian officials destroyed Wagner in Ukraine.[18] Prigozhin denied knowing about such claims at the time, and it appeared that the claim was falsely attributed to a Russian outlet.[19] Prigozhin's engagement with the claim was likely deliberate, as he may have been attempting to obliquely signal to the public about Patrushev's efforts to eliminate Wagner.

The *WSJ's* sources revealed that the Kremlin then announced plans to dismantle Wagner as a fighting force by forcing all fighters to register with the Russian MoD by July 1 – leading to Prigozhin's armed rebellion on June 23 and June 24. Prigozhin reportedly wanted to confront Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in Rostov-on-Don. Both of them were reportedly at the Southern Military District (SMD) headquarters on the day of the mutiny before escaping as Wagner forces surrounded and seized the headquarters building. Patrushev reportedly took charge of the crisis and began arranging calls with Prigozhin, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – who refused to assist Putin in quelling Prigozhin's rebellion. Lukashenko reportedly presented Prigozhin with Patrushev's proposal to allow Wagner to move to Belarus and to let Prigozhin operate abroad. Following the mutiny, the Kremlin let Prigozhin continue a seemingly normal life without punishment, and a US official noted that Kremlin officials were likely collecting information on Prigozhin and his allies prior to Patrushev's assassination plan in August 2023.

**Russian forces conducted a series of drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 21 to 22.** The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian air defenses destroyed 24 of 28 Russian-launched Shahed-131/136 drones.[20] Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Russian drones struck port infrastructure in Mykolaiv Oblast and targeted port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast.[21] Kyiv City Administration stated that Russian forces conducted a third series of drone strikes against Kyiv City in the last six days on the night of December 21 to 22, striking a multi-story residential building.[22] Russian sources claimed that Russian drones also struck targets in Dnipropetrovsk and Odesa oblasts.[23]

**The Kremlin continues to position itself as a neutral arbitrator in the Israel-Hamas war despite its recent increasing anti-Israel rhetoric.** Russian President Vladimir Putin held a telephone conversation with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas on December 22 to discuss issues related to the "unprecedented" escalation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, primarily in the Gaza Strip.[24] Putin reportedly informed Abbas about Russian efforts to deliver humanitarian aid, including medicines and medical equipment, to Gaza.[25] Putin and Abbas reportedly called for an end to fighting and the resumption of a political settlement between Israel and Palestine.[26] Russian officials proposed on December 22 that the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) amend a humanitarian aid resolution to call for an "urgent and sustainable cessation of hostilities." [27] The Kremlin has routinely postured itself as a neutral actor ready to alleviate human suffering and de-escalate the conflict since the start of the Israel-Hamas war.[28] The Kremlin has expressed a much

more anti-Israel position in recent weeks, however, and this increasingly non-neutral framing signals potential increased support for Iranian interests in the region and a Russian willingness to antagonize Israel.[29]

**US President Joe Biden signed an executive order on December 22 granting the US Treasury Department the authority to impose sanctions on banks and other financial institutions that facilitate Russian sanctions evasion.** The executive order allows the US Treasury Department to prohibit financial institutions facilitating Russian sanctions evasion from opening accounts in the US and to block all of a financial institution's current and future property and interests in the US.[30] The order stipulates that any bank or financial institution may face these measures if it conducts or facilitates transactions on behalf of a person or entity that the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has sanctioned for their involvement in the Russian defense industrial base (DIB) or in sectors that support Russia's DIB.[31] US Treasury Secretary Jannet Yellen stated on December 22 that "no one should doubt the resolve of the US and [its] partners when weighing the real risks" associated with support for Russian sanctions evasion.[32] The executive order also places sanctions on imports of Russian non-industrial diamonds, alcoholic beverages, and seafood.[33]

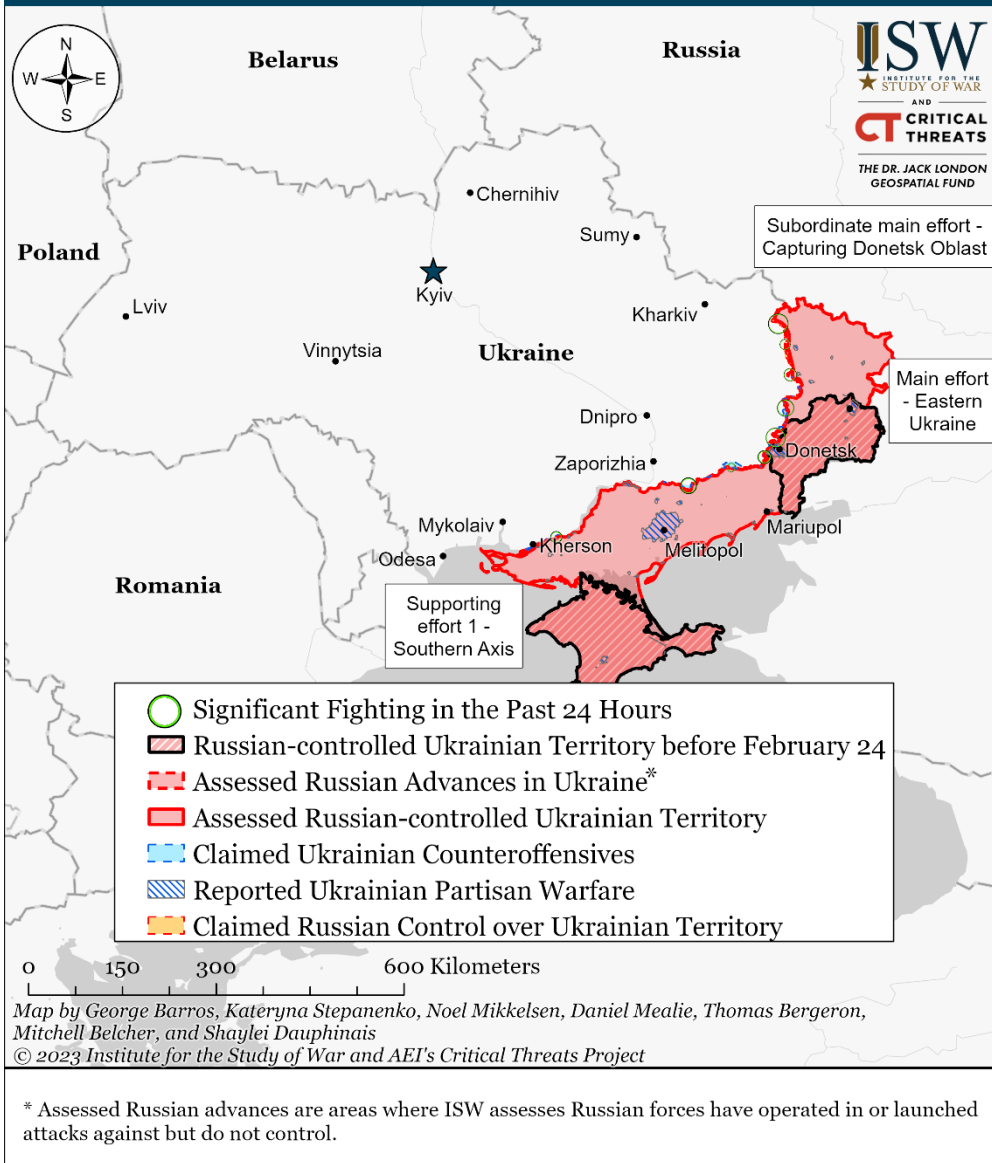
**Russian officials continue to downplay deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations, possibly as part of a concerted campaign to improve the bilateral relationship amid concerns about Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus.** Russian Ambassador to Armenia Sergei Kopyrkin stated during an interview with Kremlin newswire *TASS* on December 22 that Russia and Armenia remain "partners and strategic allies" united by common interests and history, despite "certain differences" in their bilateral and multilateral agendas.[34] Kopyrkin noted that the Armenian government maintains that it is not considering withdrawing from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) or the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the latter of which Armenia is scheduled to chair in 2024.[35] Kopyrkin stated that Russian and Armenian officials are negotiating new military-technical agreements and recently met to discuss the creation of "operational communication channels" to resolve any disagreements in the bilateral relationship, specifically disagreements between Russian and Armenian media outlets.[36] Armenian TV and Radio Commission recently revoked the license of the *Radio Tospa* station, which is affiliated with Russian propaganda outlet *Radio Sputnik*, for 30 days due to derogatory comments made by Russian propagandists about Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and the Armenian people.[37] ISW has observed Russian officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, similarly downplay the deterioration of Russian-Armenia relations as Armenia has distanced itself from Russia following Russia's failure to support Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in fall 2023.[38]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **Ukrainian officials continue to warn that Russia maintains its maximalist objectives and additional goals for territorial conquest in Ukraine, despite recent comments made by Western officials suggesting that Russia is already defeated.**
- **Ukraine will very likely receive the first batch of F-16s before the end of 2023.**
- **The Russia Aerospace Forces (VKS) reportedly lost three Su-34 attack aircraft in southern Ukraine between December 21-22.**

- **The *Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) named Russian President Vladimir Putin's close ally and Secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, as the individual responsible for the assassination of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin.**
- **The Kremlin continues to position itself as a neutral arbitrator in the Israel-Hamas war despite its recent increasing anti-Israel rhetoric.**
- **US President Joe Biden signed an executive order on December 22 granting the US Treasury Department the authority to impose sanctions on banks and other financial institutions that facilitate Russian sanctions evasion.**
- **Russian officials continue to downplay deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations, possibly as part of a concerted campaign to improve the bilateral relationship amid concerns about Russia's waning influence in the South Caucasus.**
- **Russian forces made confirmed advances northeast and southwest of Bakhmut and southwest of Avdiivka and continued positional engagements along the entire line of contact.**
- **A Ukrainian intelligence official reported that Russian forces are intensifying force generation efforts to keep pace with the rate of Russian losses in Ukraine so that they can sustain ongoing offensive operations along the front.**
- **Kremlin-appointment Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova outlined new social support measures meant to further integrate occupied Zaporizhia Oblast into Russia during a working visit to the occupied oblast on December 22.**

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



***We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these 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 the Ukrainian population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against 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
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives

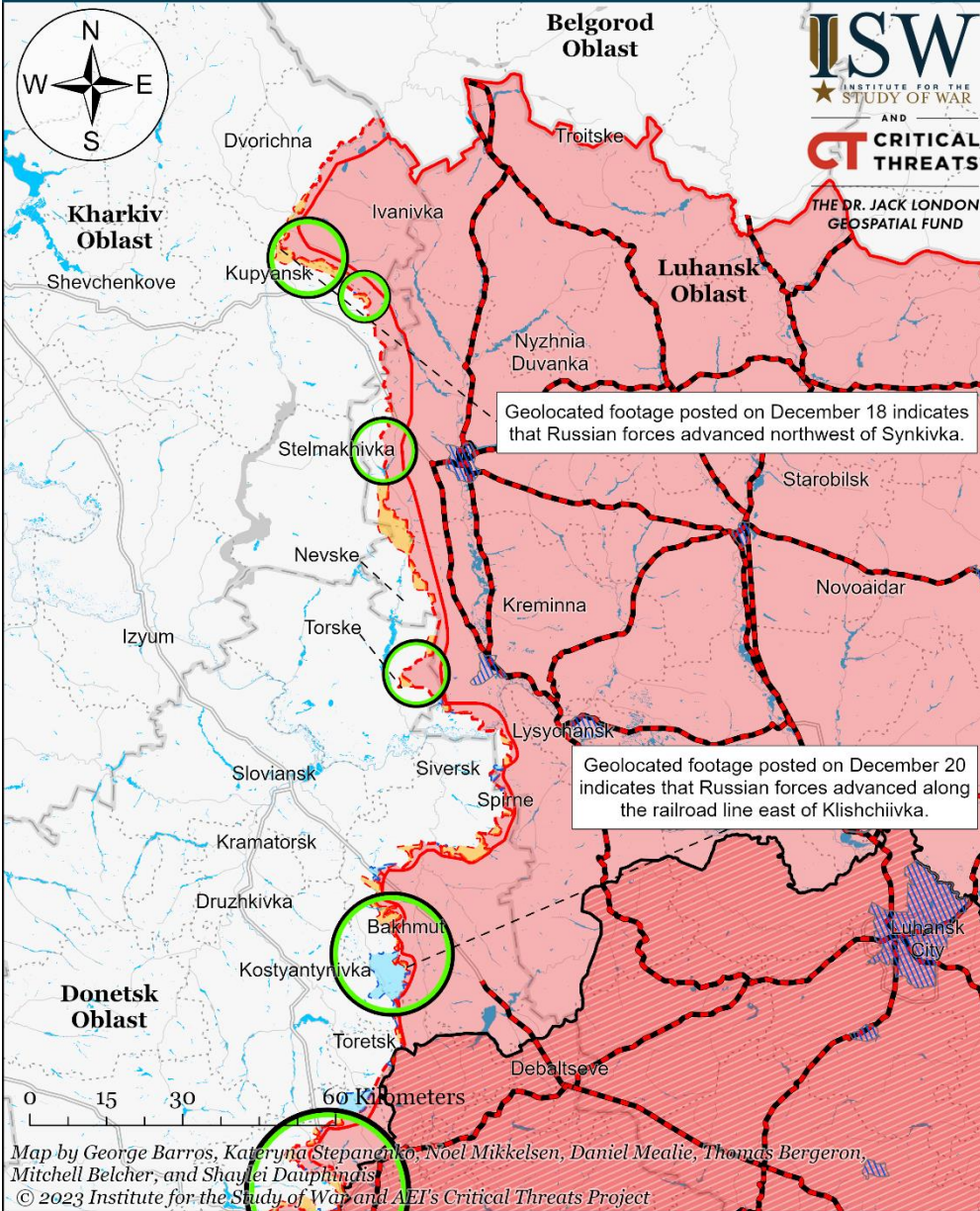
**NOTE: ISW has restructured the operational kinetic axis sections of the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to more accurately reflect the positional nature of fighting on the battlefield. Operational kinetic axis paragraphs will be shorter and more synthetic to convey the same assessment in fewer words and not to overwhelm the reader with long lists of settlement names. The level of detail included in the report has not decreased. The report’s endnotes still contain the same level of sourcing, and ISW encourages readers interested in tactical granular details to read them. ISW will explicitly flag major operational inflections in axis text as usual, so the lack of named settlements should not be taken as an indication of gains or losses of territory or changes in the frontline. ISW will lead operational axes with confirmed map changes to accord with the daily map products produced by the Geospatial Intelligence Team, supplemented by Ukrainian and Russian claims, and will also list order of battle (ORBAT) details in each axis section when available.**

### **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

#### **Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)**

Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line northeast of Kupyansk in a forest area near Synkivka and west of Kreminna near Torske, although ISW has not observed evidence of these claims.[39] Ukrainian and Russian forces continued positional engagements near Synkivka, northwest of Svatove near Stelmakhivka, and northwest of Kreminna near Terny on December 22.[40] Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo reported that Russian forces conducted almost twice the number of artillery strikes in the Kupyansk-Lyman direction on December 22 as on December 21.[41]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of December 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- 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.

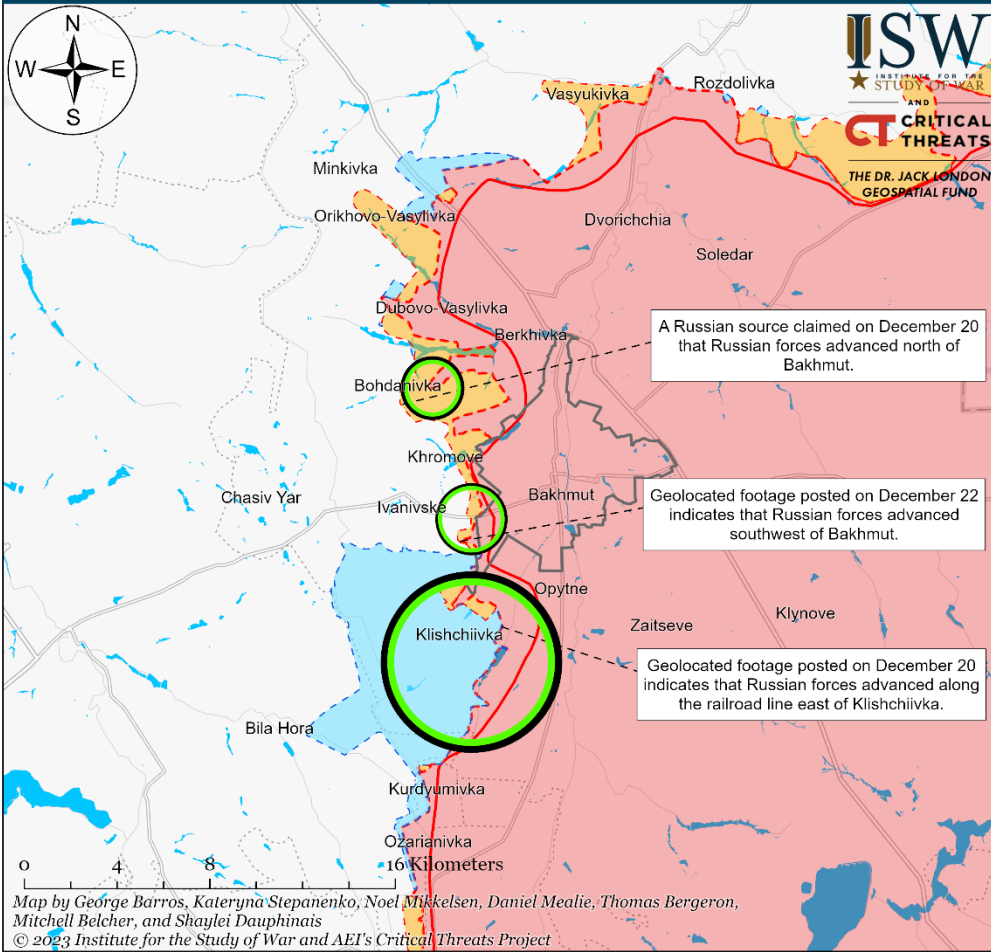


**Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)**

Geolocated footage published on December 22 indicates that Russian forces made recent gains south of Spirne (northeast of Bakhmut).[42] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted assaults in a new area northeast of Bakhmut and advanced from Berestove (23km northeast of Bakhmut) in the direction of Vyimka (21km northeast of Bakhmut), but ISW has not observed visual evidence supporting this claim.[43] Elements of the 6<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] Army Corps [AC]) are reportedly operating near Spirne.[44]

Russian forces recently advanced southwest of Bakhmut. Geolocated footage published on December 18 indicates that Russian forces advanced southwest of Bakhmut in the dacha areas near the Chornobylets gardening community and on Klishchiivka’s northwestern outskirts.[45] Geolocated footage published on December 20 also showed that Ukrainian forces conducted positional engagements near the so-called ”Alebastrova” water feature east of Klishchiivka.[46] Russian forces reportedly continued efforts to advance west of Bakhmut and conducted positional engagements northwest of Bakhmut north of Bohdanivka; west of Bakhmut near Khromove, Ivanivske, and the T0504 Chasiv Yar-Ivanivske highway; and southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.[47] A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian 200th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Northern Fleet) are operating on Bohdanivka’s northern outskirts; servicemen of the irregular ”Sever-V” Brigade (Russian Volunteer Corps) are fighting on Bohdanivka’s flanks; and that unspecified Russian airborne elements are attacking near the Bakhmut motorway, an electrical substation, and a former airfield.[48]

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of December 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

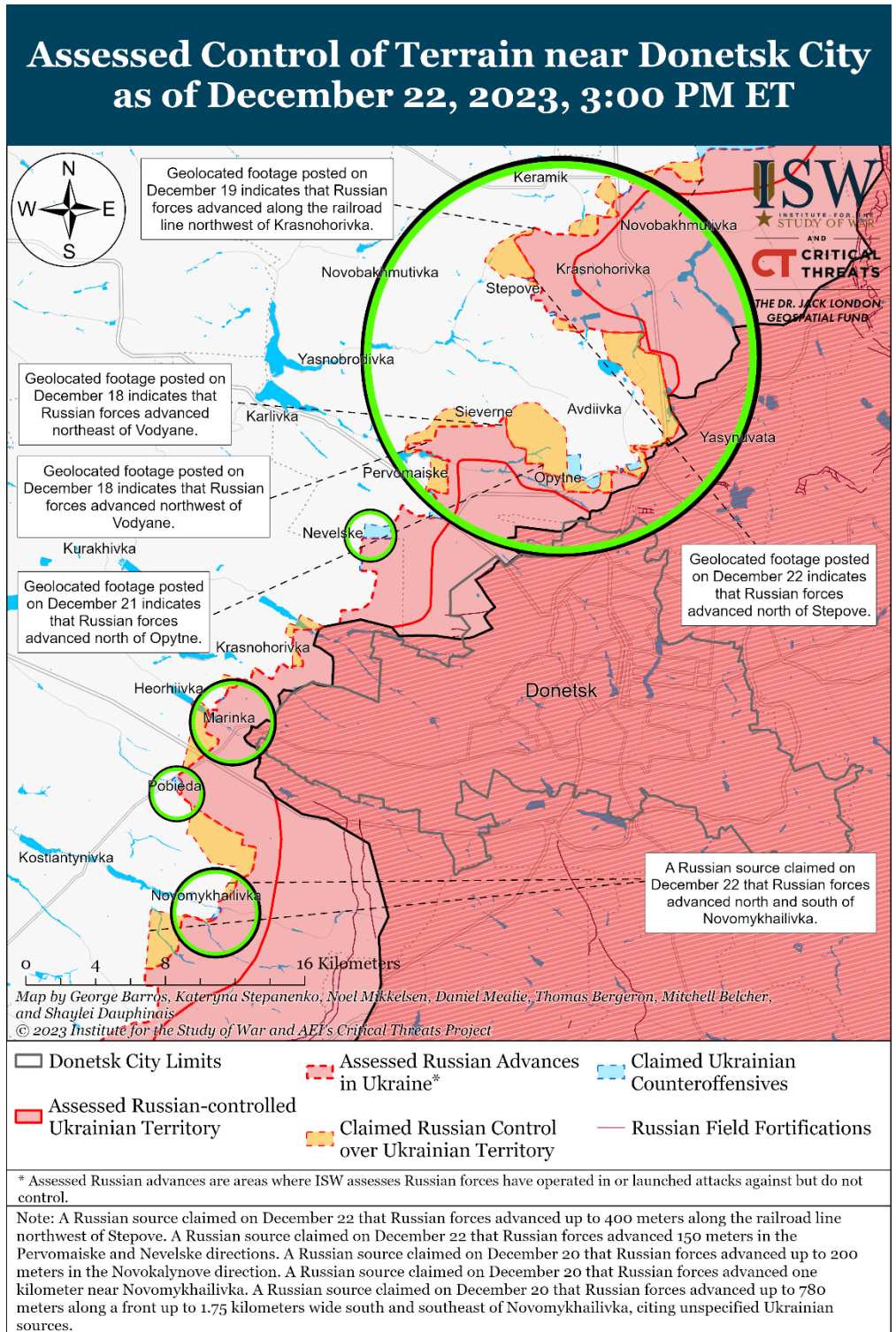
|                                       |  |                                     |
|---------------------------------------|--|-------------------------------------|
| Bakhmut City Limits                   | Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory  | Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives |
| Assessed 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.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced along a three-kilometer-wide front in the Bakhmut direction. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced up to 170 meters along a 530-meter-wide front toward the Popov Forest. A Russian source claimed on December 19 that Russian forces advanced up to 530 meters along a front up to one kilometer wide southwest of Bakhmut, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources.

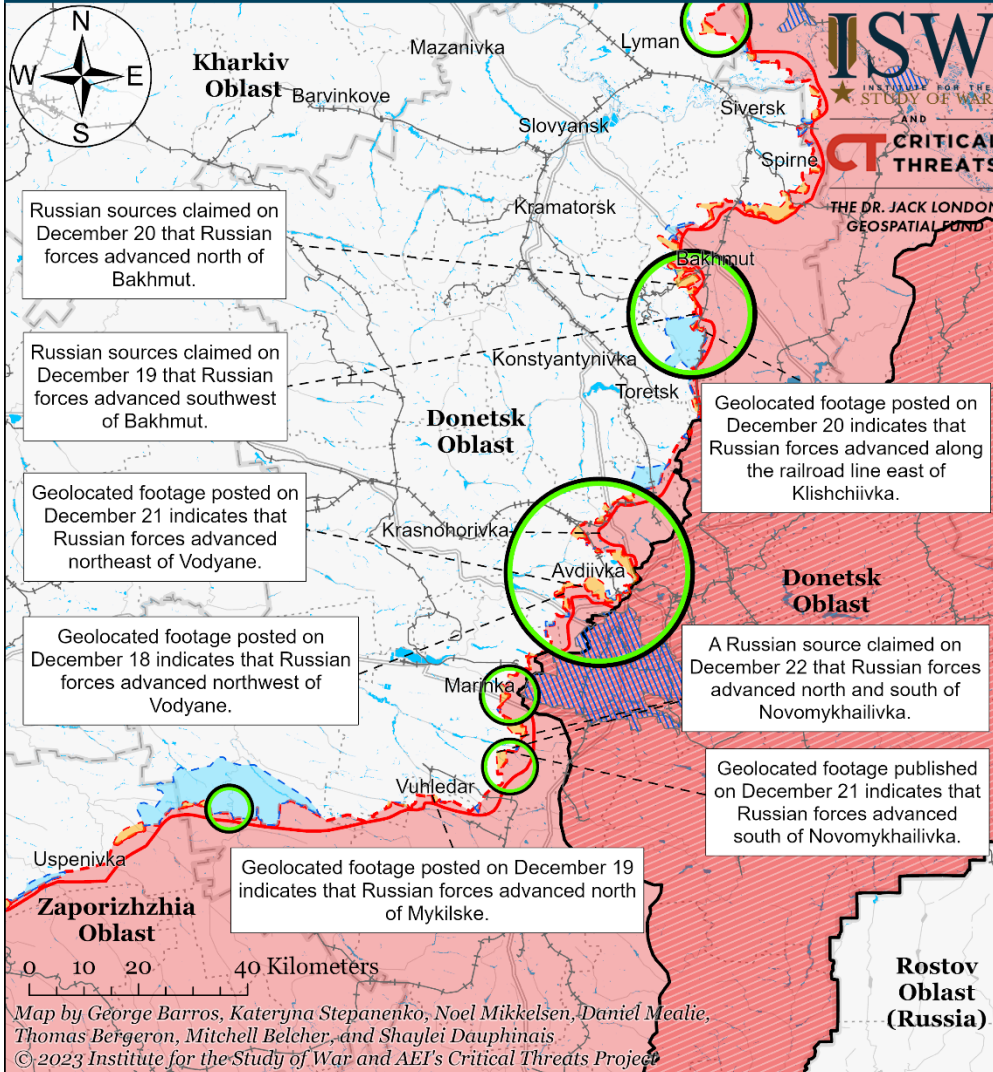
Russian forces made recent marginal advances southeast and northwest of Avdiivka. Geolocated footage published on December 21 and December 22 indicates that Russian forces marginally advanced northeast of Opytne (southwest of Avdiivka) and northeast of Stepove (northwest of Avdiivka).[49] Russian milbloggers similarly claimed that Russian forces advanced up to 400 meters in depth northwest of Stepove along the railroad and 150 meters towards Nevelske and Pervomaiske from positions in Vodyane (7km southwest of Avdiivka).[50] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that positional engagements continued near Avdiivka itself; east of Novobakhmutivka and Novokalynove, and near Stepove (all northwest of Avdiivka) in the industrial area and near the

Vynohradnyky garden community (both southeast of Avdiivka); and near Nevelske and Pervomaiske (southwest of Avdiivka).[51] A Russian milblogger claimed that the tempo of combat operations did not decrease in the Avdiivka area, and Ukrainian forces are continuing efforts to counterattack.[52] Elements of the 9<sup>th</sup> Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Donetsk People's Republic [DNR] AC) are reportedly operating in the Avdiivka direction.[53]



Russian sources claimed on December 22 that Russian forces advanced north of Novomykhailivka (southwest of Donetsk City) and on the settlement's southwestern outskirts, although ISW has not observed visual evidence of these claims.[54] Russian and Ukrainian sources indicated that fighting is ongoing west of Donetsk City near Marinka and Pobieda and southwest of Donetsk City near Novomykhailivka.[55] Elements of the Russian 20<sup>th</sup> Guards Motorized Rifle Division (8<sup>th</sup> Guards Combined Arms Army [CAA], Southern Military District [SMD]); 68<sup>th</sup> Army Corps (Pacific Fleet); 155<sup>th</sup> Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet); and the DNR's "Kaskad" Operational Combat Tactical Formation are reportedly operating near Novomykhailivka.[56] Elements of the Russian 255<sup>th</sup> Motorized Rifle Regiment (20<sup>th</sup> Guards Motorized Rifle Division) are reportedly fighting in the Marinka direction.[57]

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



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- 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.

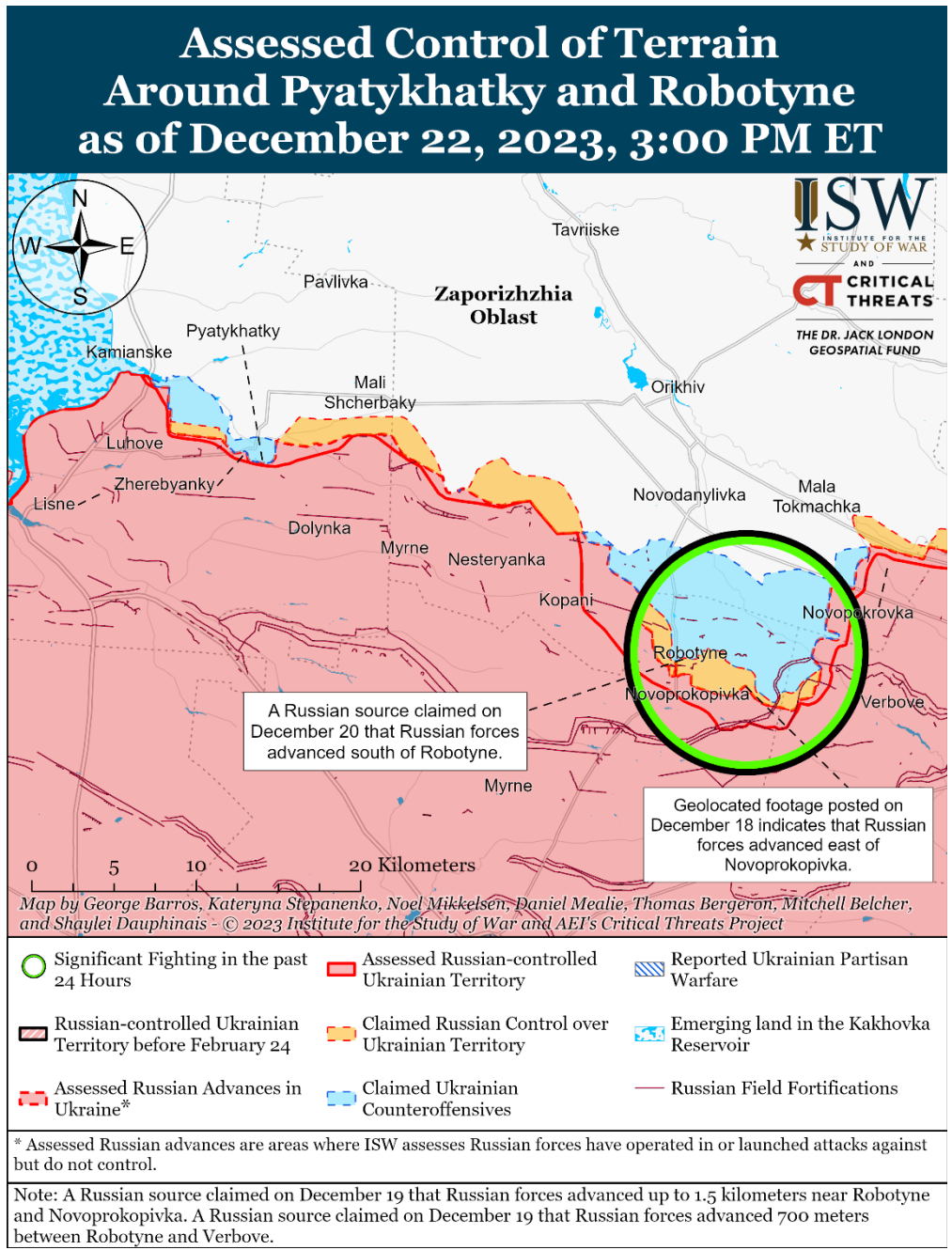
Note: A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced along a three-kilometer-wide front in the Bakhmut direction. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced up to 170 meters along a 530-meter-wide front toward the Popov Forest. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced one kilometer near Novomykhailivka. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced up to 780 meters along a front up to 1.75 kilometers wide south and southeast of Novomykhailivka, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources.

**Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)**

Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on December 22, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area.[58] The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Staromayorske (south of Velyka Novosilka).[59] Elements of the 127th Motorized Rifle Division (5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District), including elements of the 218th Tank Regiment and 294th Motorized Rifle Regiment, are operating in this area.[60]



Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 22, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area.[61] Ukrainian and Russian sources reported fighting near Robotyne and Verbove (east of Robotyne) and along the Robotyne-Kopani line (northwest of Robotyne).[62] One milblogger claimed that the operational tempo near Verbove has slowed over the past day and that although the weather (atmospheric visibility) has improved, mud is still making it difficult for heavy and tracked vehicles to move through the area.[63] Elements of the 76th Air Assault (VDV) Division and unspecified Southern Military District (SMD) units are fighting in the area.[64]



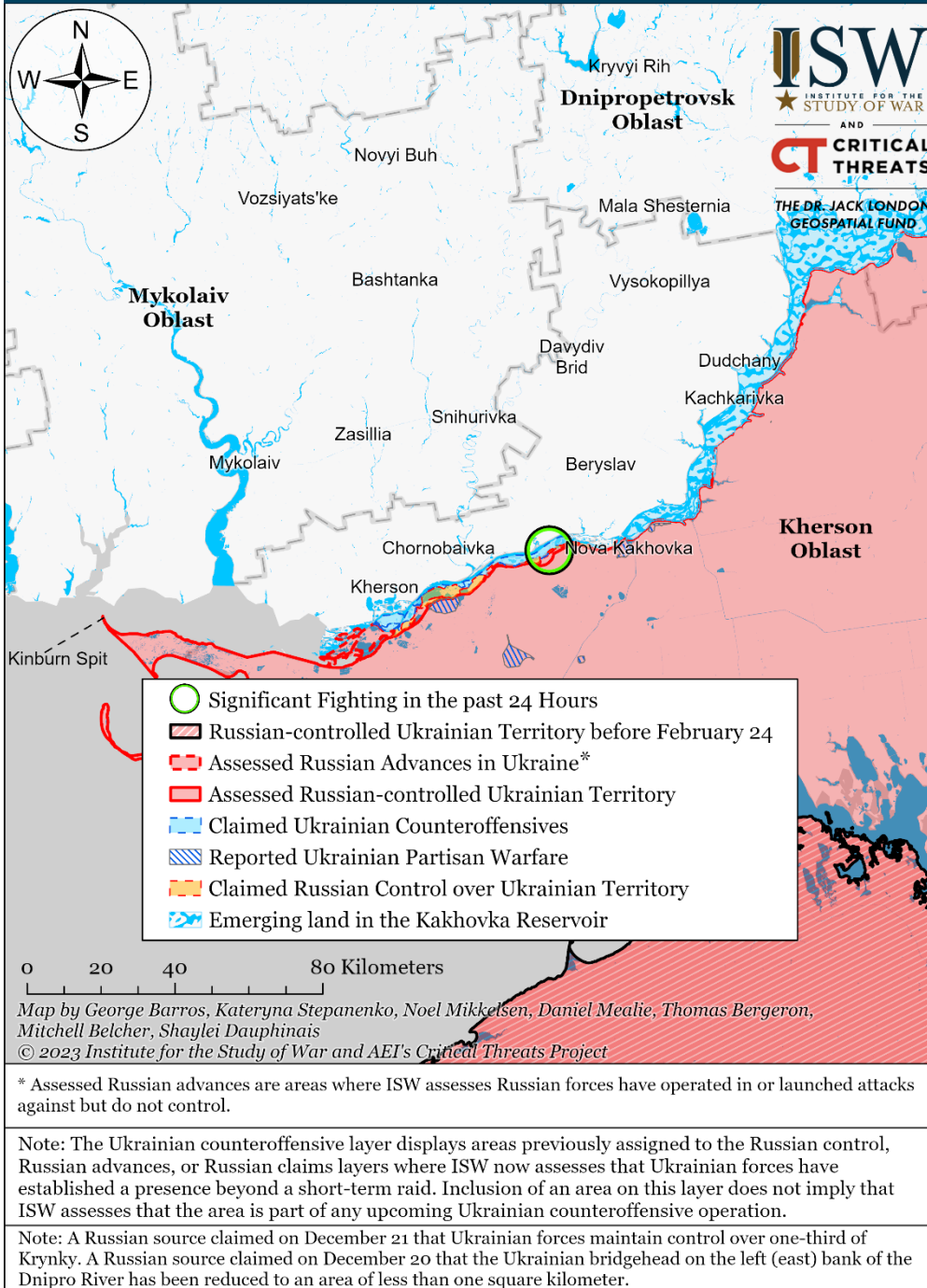
# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of December 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast as of December 22, but neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces have made confirmed territorial gains in the area.[65] Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting is ongoing in and around Krynky, and one milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces currently hold one-third of the settlement.[66] Elements of the 18th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District), including constituent regiments of the 70th Motorized Rifle Division, are operating on the east bank of the Dnipro River.[67]



# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 22, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



## **Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts (Russian objective: Expand combat power without conducting general mobilization)**

A Ukrainian intelligence official reported that Russian forces are intensifying force generation efforts to offset the rate of Russian losses in Ukraine in order to sustain ongoing offensive operations along the front. Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Deputy Chief Major General Vadym Skibitskyi stated on December 21 that Russian forces recruit 1,000 to 1,200 new personnel each day to replenish losses in Ukraine and send most of these new recruits immediately to the front.[68] Ukrainian officials previously reported in summer and spring 2023 that Russia was recruiting roughly 20,000 personnel through crypto-mobilization efforts per month.[69] Skibitskyi's figure suggests that Russia currently generates roughly 30,000 - 37,200 new personnel a month, a number closer to Russian officials' claims that Russia currently recruits roughly 40,000 new personnel in a month.[70] Skibitskyi stated that Russian forces are trying to maintain manpower levels for its expeditionary force in Ukraine at a level of at least 92 to 95 percent of the current deployed forces' strength so that Russian forces can maintain the tempo of their ongoing offensive operations.[71] Skibitskyi's statement suggests that Russian forces are unable to simultaneously generate large reserve forces while maintaining or increasing Russian forces' operational tempo in Ukraine. The apparent Russian force generation effort to maintain current offensive operations by offsetting high Russian casualties will likely be insufficient to fully replenish and reconstitute existing units in Ukraine if Ukrainian forces continue attriting Russian forces as they have been doing.

The Russian Federation Council approved a law on December 22 that will permit Rosgvardia to create and manage its own volunteer formations. The new law will significantly bolster Rosgvardia's force generation capacity and will likely facilitate its apparent efforts to recruit and integrate a wide array of volunteer fighters, including former Wagner Group personnel.[72] The Russian Federation Council also approved a law on criminal liability for discrediting Rosgvardia volunteer formations, indicating that Russian leadership likely intends to grant Rosgvardia volunteer formations the same status, benefits, and protections that existing volunteer formations receive.[73]

A Ukrainian military observer stated that Russian forces continue to receive assistance from Iran in establishing new capabilities for Shahed-131/136 drones. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated on December 22 that at least 12 Russian specialists will complete training on manufacturing Shahed drones at the Iranian Pardis Technological Development Center in Tehran by the end of 2023.[74] Mashovets stated that the Iranian Air Force recently delivered up to 96 Shahed engines to Russia between December 15 and 16 and that Iran intends to send 40 Shahed launchers to Russia in the next two weeks.[75] Mashovets stated that the Russian command plans to deploy equipment for at least two additional Shahed launch sites on the territory of the 726th Air Defense Training Center in Yeysk, Krasnodar Krai, as well as in Rylsk, Kursk Oblast.[76] ISW cannot confirm Mashovets' reporting at this time, but it is consistent with an apparent intensification in Russian-Iranian cooperation over recent months[77]

### **Russian Technological Adaptations (Russian objective: Introduce technological innovations to optimize systems for use in Ukraine)**

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted footage on December 22 purporting to show unspecified Russian Airborne (VDV) elements in an unspecified sector of the front using drones to deliver water, food, communications, and ammunition to forward Russian units on the frontline.[78] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces only use drones to deliver ammunition and supplies to frontline units when delivery by ground transport is not possible.[79]

## **Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)**

Kremlin-appointment Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova outlined new social support measures meant to further integrate occupied Zaporizhia Oblast into Russia during a working visit to the occupied oblast on December 22. Lvova-Belova met with Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky and discussed support for orphans and children without parental care at the Melitopol Center for Social and Psychological Rehabilitation of Children.[80] Lvova-Belova stated that her administration will provide children with "vouchers for sanatorium and resort treatment" as part of the "Country for Children" charitable foundation. "The Country for Children" foundation operates in occupied areas of Ukraine and is likely meant to generate dependencies on such Russian-controlled foundations for humanitarian aid, medical services, and social support.[81] The foundation also facilitates the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia using various medical-psychiatric and sociocultural programs that bring Ukrainian children to various camps and resorts in mainly southern Russia.[82]

Russian occupation authorities are using the education system in occupied Ukraine to instill pro-Russian sentiments in Ukrainian youth. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin stated that over 50 youth from Donetsk Oblast took part in a discussion on the "crimes of the Kyiv regime" as part of the "Mercury-2023" youth group format.[83] Pushilin emphasized that it is "fundamental" that youth learn about Ukrainian "neo-Nazism" so it does not happen again.[84] Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Head Leonid Pasechnik similarly stated that he participated in the first meeting of the "Znanie" educational organization's Luhansk Oblast branch to discuss educational programming for youth in the occupied oblast.[85] Pasechnik emphasized that it is important for children to receive education against the backdrop of the ongoing "information war" and Ukraine's alleged constant distortion of history. Russian occupation heads may be escalating efforts to formalize anti-Ukrainian curricula in occupied schools to accord with the Kremlin's recent escalation of rhetoric meant to strip Ukraine of its sovereignty.[86]

## **Russian Information Operations and Narratives**

Russian officials reiterated vague threats and complaints against Western institutions on December 22 in an attempt to discourage perceived "anti-Russian" policies on the part of these institutions. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated that the admission of Ukraine to the European Union (EU) will undermine the EU and lead to its collapse in response to European Council (EC) President Charles Michel's announcement on December 14 that the EU began negotiations on Ukraine's and Moldova's accession.[87] Peskov also stated that the "illegal seizure" of frozen Russian assets would result in unspecified consequences and retaliatory Russian actions.[88] Peskov's comment was likely a response to recent Western reporting that the G7 may consider using frozen Russian assets to fund aid to Ukraine.[89] Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov additionally stated in an interview on December 22 that NATO is an "aggressive bloc" aimed at weakening Russia and eliminating Russia's role as an independent world power, consistent with frequent comments by Russian officials trying to undermine the NATO alliance.[90]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov attempted to justify Russia's continued role in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on December 22 by claiming that there is no proof that Russia is destroying Ukrainian cultural heritage.[91] Kremlin-appointed

Children’s Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova recently also denied Russia’s war crimes and genocidal policies aimed at erasing Ukrainian cultural and historical identity several days before Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree further formalizing avenues for the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.[92] ISW continues to assess that the forced deportation and adoption of Ukrainian children likely amounts to a violation of the Convention of the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.[93]

Russian sources continued to deliberately misrepresent legitimate Ukrainian statements about mobilization on December 21 and 22 in an effort to amplify Ukrainian social tensions. Russian sources fixated on misreported comments by Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov and proposed legislation within the Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada regarding the mobilization of Ukrainian men living abroad.[94] Russian opposition outlet *Radio Svoboda* reported on December 22 that Ukrainian Verkhovna Rada National Security, Defense, and Intelligence Committee member Vadym Ivchenko clarified that the considered legislation will require Ukrainian men of conscription age living abroad to provide identification for their military record.[95]

### **Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on December 22 that elements of the Belarusian 38th Separate Guards Air Assault Brigade participated in combat training in an unspecified location likely in Belarus.[96]

**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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