Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Grace Mappes, Angela Howard, and Frederick W. Kagan November 26, 3:45pm ET

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.

The overall pace of operations along the frontline has slowed in recent days due to deteriorating weather conditions but is likely to increase starting in the next few weeks as temperatures drop and the ground freezes throughout the theater. Ukrainian and Russian reporting from critical frontline areas throughout eastern and southern Ukraine, including Svatove, Bakhmut, and Vuhledar, indicates that operations on both sides are currently bogged down by heavy rain and resulting heavy mud.¹ Temperatures are forecasted to drop throughout Ukraine over the next week, which will likely freeze the ground and expedite the pace of fighting as mobility increases for both sides. The temperature in areas in Ukraine's northeast, such as along the Svatove-Kreminna line, will dip to near-or-below-freezing daily highs between November 28 and December 4. It will likely take the ground some days of consistent freezing temperatures to solidify, which means that ground conditions are likely to be set to allow the pace of operations to increase throughout Ukraine over the course of the weekend of December 3-4 and into the following week. It is unclear if either side is actively planning or preparing to resume major offensive or counter-offensive operations at that time, but the meteorological factors that have been hindering such operations will begin lifting.

Russian officials are continuing efforts to deport children to Russian under the guise of medical rehabilitation schemes and adoption programs. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on November 26 that the Russian occupation administration in Luhansk Oblast conducted medical examinations of 15,000 children between the ages of two and 17 and found that 70% of the children (10,500) are in need of "special medical care" that requires them to be removed to Russia for "treatment." The Resistance Center stated that Russian officials intend these forced deportation schemes to lure children's families to Russia to collect their children after the children receive treatments, at which point the Resistance Center assessed Russian officials will prevent those families from returning home to Ukraine. The Center's report is consistent with ISW's previous assessment that Russian officials are conducting a deliberate depopulation campaign in occupied Ukrainian territories.³

Russian Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova additionally posted an excerpt from a documentary film chronicling the story of the children she adopted from Mariupol.⁴ Lvova-Belova has largely been at the forefront of the concerted Russian effort to remove Ukrainian children from Ukrainian territory and adopt them into Russian families, which may constitute a violation of the Geneva Convention as well as a deliberate ethnic cleansing campaign.⁵ Lvova-Belova's documentary is likely meant to lend legitimacy to the ongoing adoption of Ukrainian children into Russian families, just as the guise of medical necessity is likely intended to justify mass deportations of Ukrainian children to Russian territory.

Russian officials may be attempting to counterbalance the influence of Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin through the promotion of other parallel military structures. The Ukrainian Main Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on November 26 that Russian officials appointed a Viktor Yanukovych-linked, pro-Kremlin businessman, Armen Sarkisyan, as the new administrator for prisons in Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine and that Sarkisyan intends to use the role to create a new "private military company." The GUR

reported that Sarkisyan modeled his effort to create a new private military company on the Wagner Group's recruitment of prisoners in the Russian Federation and that Russian-Armenian businessman Samvel Karapetyan is sponsoring the effort. Karapetyan is the owner of Tashir Holding company, a longtime subcontractor for Russian stated-owned energy company Gazprom. The GUR reported that Sarkisyan's attempt to create a new private military structure is an attempt to create a counterweight to Prigozhin's de facto monopoly in the field of Russian private military companies. It is likely that high-ranking Russian officials have approved Sarkisyan's efforts as private military companies are illegal in Russia.

Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov reported that he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on November 25 and claimed that they discussed the participation of Chechen units in the war in Ukraine and the creation of new Russian military and Rosgvardia units comprised of Chechen personnel. ¹⁰ ISW has previously reported that Kadyrov routinely promotes his efforts to create Chechen-based parallel military structures. ¹¹ Russian officials may be further promoting Kadyrov's existing parallel military structures and Sarkisyan's efforts to create a private military company to counteract the growing influence of Prigozhin, whom ISW has previously assessed uses his own parallel military structures to establish himself as a central figure in the Russian pro-war ultranationalist community. ¹²

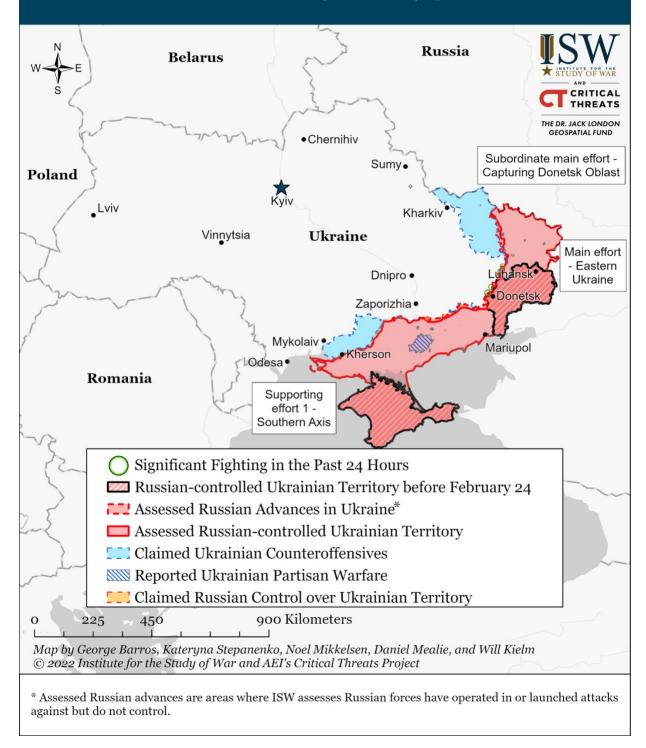
Russian forces are likely using inert Kh-55 cruise missiles in their massive missile strike campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure, further highlighting the depletion of the Russian military's high precision weapons arsenal. The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) reported on November 26 that Russia is likely removing nuclear warheads from ageing Kh-55 missiles and launching the missiles without warheads at targets in Ukraine. The UK MoD suggested that Russian forces are likely launching the inert missiles as decoys to divert Ukrainian air defenses. Ukrainian officials have previously reported that Russian forces have extensively used the non-nuclear variant of the missile system, the Kh-555, to conduct strikes on critical Ukrainian infrastructure since mid-October. The Russian military's likely use of a more strategic weapon system in the role of a decoy for Ukrainian air defenses corroborates ISW's previous reporting that the Russian military has significantly depleted its arsenal of high-precision missiles. The use of more strategic weapons systems in support of the campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure suggests that the Russian military is heavily committed to the strike campaign and still mistakenly believes that it can generate strategically significant effects through that campaign.

Key Takeaways

- The overall pace of operations in Ukraine is likely to increase in the upcoming weeks as the ground freezes throughout the theater.
- Russian officials are continuing efforts to deport Ukrainian children to Russia.
- Russian officials may be trying to counteract Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin's growing influence through the promotion of other parallel Russian military structures.
- Russian forces are likely using inert Kh-55 missiles designed solely to carry nuclear warheads in its campaign against Ukrainian infrastructure, highlighting the Russian military's depletion of high-precision weapons.
- Russian forces continued defensive operations against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line.
- Russian forces continued offensive operations in the directions of Bakhmut and Avdiivka.

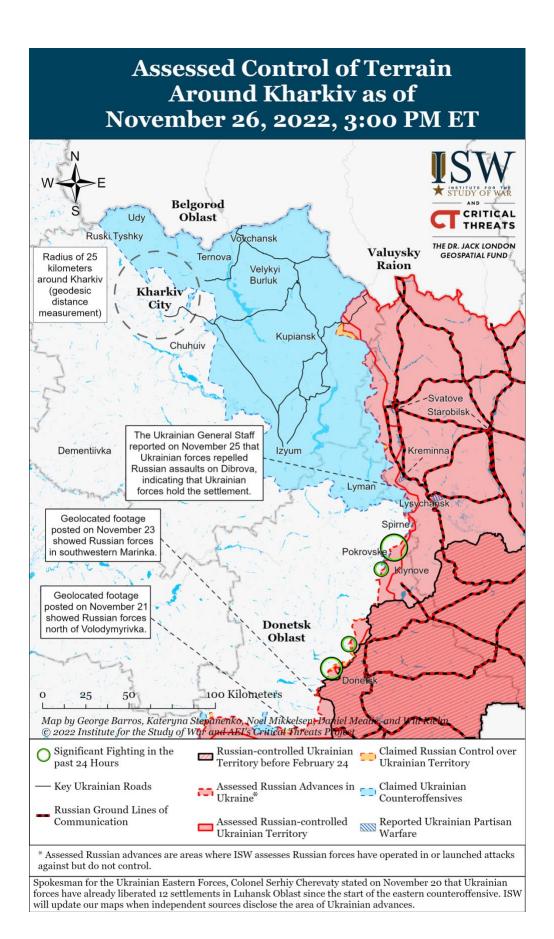
- Russian forces continued establishing fortifications in eastern Kherson Oblast.
- * Russian tactical, logistical, and equipment failures continue to decrease morale of Russian troops and drive searches for scapegoats.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of November 26, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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.

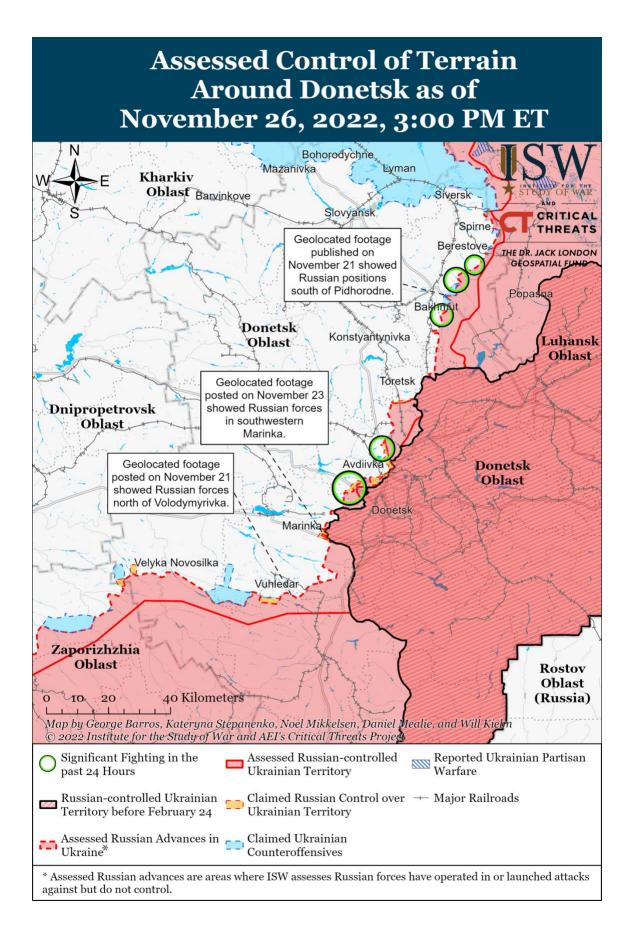
- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and one supporting effort);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas



<u>Ukrainian Counteroffensives</u> (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

Eastern Ukraine: (Eastern Kharkiv Oblast-Western Luhansk Oblast)

Russian forces continued defensive operations against ongoing Ukrainian counteroffensives along the Svatove-Kreminna line on November 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops are conducting active defense operations northwest of Svatove in the direction of Kupyansk and west of Kreminna in the direction of Lyman.¹⁷ Russian sources continued to discuss marginal Russian advances within Novoselivske, 15km northwest of Svatove.¹⁸ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian troops repelled Ukrainian attacks on Kolomychikha (10km west of Svatove) and Ploshchanka (15km north of Kreminna).¹⁹ Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai noted that Ukrainian troops are continuing to succeed around Svatove and Kreminna, partially due to the low quality and incoherence of mobilized Russian recruits operating in the area.²⁰ Haidai reported that Ukrainian troops are additionally defending against continual Russian attacks on Bilohorivka, 10km south of Kreminna.²¹



Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations around Bakhmut on November 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut, within 4km south of Bakhmut near Opytne, and within 18km northeast of Bakhmut near Soledar, Bakhmutske, and Yakovlivka.²² A Russian milblogger posted a control of terrain map claiming that Russian forces control Opytne, although ISW has not observed visual evidence to corroborate this claim.²³ Russian and Ukrainian sources continued to claim that muddy conditions are slowing operations in the Bakhmut area.²⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that fierce fighting between Ukrainian and Russian forces continued on the southern outskirts of Bakhmut.²⁵

Russian forces continued to conduct offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on November 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults within 23km southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske, Krasnohorivka, and Nevelske. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces also continued offensive operations in the direction of Novomykhailivka (36km southwest of Avdiivka). Geolocated footage posted on November 26 shows Ukrainian forces striking advancing Russian tanks southwest of Novoselivka Druha (9km northeast of Avdiivka).

Russian forces continued to conduct defensive operations in western Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts on November 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are conducting active defensive operations in these areas.²⁹ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian counterattacks within 79km southwest of Donetsk City near Mykilske and Vremivka in western Donetsk Oblast.³⁰ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued routine artillery and air strikes along the line of contact in Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.³¹



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

ISW expanded Ukrainian counteroffensives to all of right bank Kherson Oblast on November 11 based on geolocated footage of Ukrainian forces liberating Kherson City and settlements north of the Dnipro River. Russian forces partially destroyed the Kakhovka and Antonivsky bridges, which indicates that Russian forces are not intending to hold positions on the right (western) bank. ISW assesses with high confidence that Ukrainian forces will clear the remaining settlements along the western bank of the river in the coming days, although some Russian troops may have remained behind to conduct partisan operations. Russian sources indicated on November 21 that Ukrainian forces are holding positions on Karantynyy Island near Kherson City, but it is unclear if Ukrainian forces regained control over other islands along the Dnipro River.

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

Note: ISW will report on activities in Kherson Oblast as part of the Southern Axis in this and subsequent updates. Ukraine's counteroffensive in right-bank Kherson Oblast has accomplished its stated objectives, so ISW will not present a Southern Ukraine counteroffensive section until Ukrainian forces resume counteroffensives in southern Ukraine.

Russian forces continued establishing fortifications in eastern Kherson Oblast and conducted routine artillery fire against areas on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River on November 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are fortifying their positions along an unspecified coastline, likely referring to the Black Sea coast, and are preparing a defense-in-depth.³² Russian forces are reportedly moving MLRS and S-300 systems closer to Kherson City, indicating that Russian forces may intend to increase the tempo of rocket and anti-air missile strikes against ground targets north of the Dnipro River in the coming days.³³ Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces shelled Kherson City, Antonivka, Chornobaivka, and Beryslav – all on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River.³⁴

Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian force concentrations and military assets in Russian rear areas in southern Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian ammunition depot in Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, injuring 50 Russian military personnel, and two warehouses in Vasylivskyi Raion, injuring 130 personnel and destroying seven pieces of equipment.³⁵ The Ukrainian Mayor of Melitopol, Ivan Fedorov, reported that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian ammunition depot in Mykhailivka on the northern outskirts of Melitopol on November 25.³⁶ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces struck Chaplynka (40km south of Nova Kakhovka on the T2202 Nova Kakhovka-Armiansk route) and Skadovsk (R57-T2213 intersection on the Kherson City-Skadovsk route) in Kherson Oblast.³⁷

Russian forces continued to conduct routine artillery, rocket, and missile strikes west of Hulyaipole and in Mykolaiv and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts on November 26. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck Dnipro City.³⁸ Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces shelled Ochakiv, less than 5km north of the Kinburn Spit. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces shelled Nikopol and Marhanets, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.³⁹

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

Russian tactical, logistical, and equipment failures continue to decrease the morale of Russian troops and drive searches for scapegoats. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) First Deputy Information Minister Danil Bezsonov claimed on November 25 that "the mistakes of military authorities of all levels" forced Russian President Vladimir Putin to order unpopular partial mobilization. Decrease alleged that Russian military authorities are relying on the mobilized personnel to correct authorities' planning mistakes while leaving mobilized soldiers in poor conditions. A prominent Russian milblogger described "extremely outdated equipment" with which mobilized soldiers were photographed during training in Kostroma as "depressing." Another Russian milblogger lamented the inability of Russian forces to defend against Ukrainian drones without anti-drone systems, thermal imagers, drones, and radio stations. The milblogger blamed wealthy elites for their failure to understand the importance of anti-drone warfare. The Ukrainian General Staff stated on November 26 that Russian authorities continue to struggle to

provide logistical support for mobilized soldiers.⁴⁵ Russian civilians are reportedly decreasingly willing to support material drives to fill that gap, though civilian collection drives for mobilized soldiers are ongoing.⁴⁶

Actors in the Russian information space have been divided on whether to accept complaints of Russian soldiers as guidance for improvement or to quash them for decreasing faith in Russian military leadership, as ISW has previously reported.⁴⁷ Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) First Deputy Information Minister Danil Bezsonov argued that mobilized soldiers deserve proper treatment, equipment, weapons, and attention and have the right to complain about a lack of proper equipment on November 25.⁴⁸ Bezsonov stated the mobilized do not have the right to complain about spending the night on the floor of a military recruitment office or about harsh conditions on the front.⁴⁹

A Russian source framed Russian President Vladimir Putin's November 25 creation of an electronic state information resource for information on citizens registered with the military as a resource useful in supporting better provisioning of soldiers fighting Ukraine.⁵⁰ The database is projected to begin working on April 1 to coincide with spring conscription.⁵¹

Russian forces' continued difficulties providing for soldiers' medical needs are already hindering treatment of civilians in Russian-occupied territories. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on November 26 that Russian forces in Luhansk Oblast have suffered major losses and are increasingly appropriating civilian hospitals in occupied areas for exclusively military use.⁵² Civilians in Luhansk Oblast are reportedly facing increased difficulty accessing medical services and finding space in morgues.⁵³ ISW reported on additional impacts of Russian forces' growing demand for medical care on November 25.⁵⁴

The Kremlin continues to respond disproportionately to limited domestic resistance to Russia's war in Ukraine. A prominent Russian news source reported on November 25 that Russian authorities created three additional police controls and dispatched almost a dozen police and Federal Protective Service personnel (FSO) to patrol the Kremlin walls around the clock after an unidentified individual wrote "no to war" on the wall of the Kremlin.⁵⁵ The scale of such a response indicates continued Kremlin concern over domestic resistance and commitment to shaping the domestic information space and/or for the security of the Kremlin itself.

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

See topline text.

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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² https://sprotyv.mod dot gov.ua/2022/11/26/rosiyany-pidgotuvaly-105-tys-ditej-do-vyvezennya-v-rosiyu/

- ³ <u>https://isw.pub/UkrWar111622</u>; https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-25
- ⁴ https://t.me/malvovabelova/809; http://tsargrad-tv.turbopages dot org/tsargrad.tv/s/shows/jeto-moj-rebjonok-istorija-prijomnogo-syna-marii-lvovoj-belovoj_667473
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