

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 18, 2023

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December 18, 2023, 6pm 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 1pm ET on December 18. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 19 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A combination of artillery ammunition shortages and delays in the provision of Western security assistance is likely causing Ukrainian forces to husband materiel and may delay future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations. Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskiy stated in an interview with *Reuters* published on December 18 that Ukrainian forces have shortages of 122mm and 152mm shells along the entire frontline.[1] Tarnavskiy stated that the shortages are prompting Ukrainian forces to redistribute artillery ammunition and replan military tasks.[2] Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister General Ivan Havrylyuk also acknowledged on December 18 that Ukrainian artillery ammunition shortages will continue.[3] Tarnavskiy stated that Russian forces are also having issues with artillery ammunition, although Ukrainian and Western officials have reportedly assessed that the Russian forces are currently conducting artillery fire at a rate five to seven times greater than the Ukrainian forces.[4]

Both Russian and Ukrainian forces have likely expended large portions of their Soviet-era stocks of 122mm and 152mm artillery shells, forcing both to look abroad for other stocks of this artillery ammunition. Russia has recently received large quantities of these shells from North Korea, and Ukraine and its Western partners have engaged in efforts to source these shells from foreign stocks.[5] It is unclear what delays or impediments there may be in Ukrainian and Western efforts to source 122mm and 152mm shells and how any such delays may be contributing to current Ukrainian shortages. Ukrainian forces are increasingly using Western-provided 155mm artillery systems along the front, and possible delays in Western security assistance may impact available supplies of 155mm shells, although US assistance packages have recently included 155mm shells.[6] Havrylyuk stated that Ukraine is currently focusing on the domestic production of drones to offset artillery shortages and is planning to produce 155mm ammunition in Ukraine with Western companies in 2024.[7]

Artillery shortages and delays in Western security assistance will create uncertainty in Ukrainian operational plans and likely prompt Ukrainian forces to conserve resources, which may force Ukrainian forces to make tough decisions about prioritizing certain sectors of the front over sectors where limited territorial setbacks are least damaging. *BBC's* Russian service reported that Ukrainian officials said that they make periodic changes to what could be considered rough operational plans for 2024 based on the situation at the front.[8] A Ukrainian official reportedly stated that it is difficult to make military calculations for these plans due to the significant reduction in Western aid to Ukraine since September 2023.[9] Tarnavskiy stated that Ukraine is preparing reserves for further large-scale actions.[10] Artillery shortages and delays in Western aid will very likely decrease Ukraine's ability to plan and prepare for these actions. Delays in concrete Ukrainian operational planning and the materiel necessary for counteroffensive preparations will likely in turn delay 2024 counteroffensive operations.

Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi declined to comment on recent Western reporting about Ukrainian counteroffensive and Russian offensive plans for 2024. Zaluzhnyi stated on December 18 that he would not comment on Ukraine's military plans for 2024 and responded to *BILD's* recent article about Russia's strategic goals in Ukraine through 2026 by stating that German intelligence officers have a right to their opinion.[11]

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 18 that Russian forces have enough drones to launch daily strikes against Ukraine from different directions.[12] Ihnat stated that Russian forces are also stockpiling cruise and ballistic missiles, including Iskander, S-400, Kh-101, and Kh-555 missiles.[13] Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed five Russian-launched Shahed-131/136 drones and a Kh-39 missile over Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Vinnytsia, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts.[14]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly forming four new military transport aviation (VTA) regiments, although these efforts are likely aimed at reorganizing existing VTA units in support of Russia's force posturing rather than adding new capability in the short term. Kremlin-affiliated outlet *Izvestia*, quoting an unnamed Russian MoD official, claimed that the MoD decided to create and deploy four new VTA regiments to operate in the northern, southern, and western strategic directions and has already created the first of these regiments in the Russian Far East.[15] *Izvestia* claimed that Russian officials held an event in Ulan Ude, Republic of Buryatia on December 1 celebrating the reactivation of the 600th VTA Regiment.[16] The Soviet Union originally formed the 600th VTA in 1963, which was based in Shadrinsk, Kurgan Oblast until the regiment relocated to the Lithuanian Soviet Republic in 1965. Russia disbanded the 600th VTA in 1998 by merging the regiment with the 8th Guards VTA Regiment alongside other VTA formations. The reactivation of this unit suggests that the Russian MoD is restructuring its existing VTA forces more along Soviet-era lines. *Izvestia* added that the Russian MoD plans to base another VTA regiment in Tambov, Tambov Oblast by the end of 2023 and has been expanding local airfield infrastructure to support this basing. The Russian MoD source claimed that the VTA command will task the new regiments with transporting personnel, weapons, and military equipment, as well as supporting landings for airborne (VDV) troops and reconnaissance units. The Russian MoD source also claimed that the new VTA regiments will receive new and modernized Il-76 airlifters, An-26 transport aircraft, and possibly Mi-26 helicopters to help improve Russian logistics. *Izvestia* claimed that the Russian MoD began working on creating new VTA regiments in 2021 and aims to allocate more than 100 new and modernized Il-76s to the new

regiments by the end of the decade – a goal that the Russian defense industrial base may struggle to fulfill. *Izvestia* also claimed that Russian An-124 and Il-76 aircraft conducted over 10,000 sorties since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Russian Government Commission on Legislative Activity supported a bill that would criminalize “Russophobia” abroad, likely as part of ongoing efforts to maintain and increase Russian influence in post-Soviet countries. Russian State Duma Deputy from the United Russia party, Irina Yarovaya, proposed a draft bill that would punish foreign citizens and stateless individuals who do not permanently reside in Russia for “Russophobia” outside of Russia.[17] The current law can only punish foreign officials, foreign citizens employed by international organizations, and foreign citizens using their official positions for spreading “Russophobia” publicly or committing “Russophobic” acts.[18] The law defines “Russophobia” as acts or public calls to commit discriminatory actions against Russian citizens or “compatriots.”[19] Russia has intentionally and broadly defined “compatriots” as ethnic Russians and Russian speakers and does not limit the definition to those holding Russian citizenship or residing in the Russian Federation.[20] Russian officials have routinely criticized efforts in the South Caucasus and Central Asia that promote indigenous languages and education at the perceived expense of Russian language and education.[21] Russian officials may use the proposed bill to threaten foreign officials with criminal proceedings for promoting indigenous language and education programs by labeling these initiatives “Russophobic.” Russian authorities may use this new bill to intensify criticisms against foreign citizens and officials by initiating criminal proceedings as part of ongoing efforts to enforce foreign compliance with Russian-supported and pro-Russian initiatives, programs, and narratives.

Russian officials simplified requirements to obtain Russian citizenship for Belarusian, Kazakh, and Moldovan citizens amid continued hostility towards migrants in Russian society. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree on December 18 allowing Belarusian citizens to submit a citizenship application without proof of a prior long-term permanent residence in Russia or proficiency in Russian language, history, and civics.[22] Kazakh and Moldovan citizens must still provide proof of Russian language proficiency.[23] This distinction in requirements is in line with the fallacious Kremlin assertions that Belarusians and Ukrainians are actually Russians and that neither Belarus nor Ukraine has a distinctive language or culture.[24] Belarusians, Kazakhs, and Moldovans are also required to submit identifying documents and proof of their current residence in Russia.[25] Russian efforts to simplify citizenship for migrants appear hypocritical and inconsistent with ongoing migrant crackdowns aimed at coercing migrants into Russian military service and placating the xenophobic Russian ultranationalist community.[26] The simplification of Belarusian citizens’ citizenship requirements may be related to long-term efforts to absorb Belarus into Russia through the Union State structure and to pursue other objectives in Kazakhstan and Moldova.[27]

The European Union (EU) adopted its 12th sanctions package in connection with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The European Council (EC) adopted a sanctions package on December 18 that aims to weaken sources of funding for Russia’s war effort and degrade Russia’s defense industrial base (DIB).[28] The sanctions include measures banning the import of Russian diamonds, prohibiting the re-export of dual use goods and technologies, instituting strict export restrictions on 29 legal entities that directly support the Russian DIB, enforcing a transit ban for all goods that Russian forces use on the battlefield in Ukraine, and strengthening compliance rules for the G7 price cap on Russian oil and petroleum products.[29]

Key Takeaways:

- **A combination of artillery ammunition shortages and delays in the provision of Western security assistance is likely causing Ukrainian forces to husband materiel and may delay future Ukrainian counteroffensive operations.**
- **Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi declined to comment on recent Western reporting about Ukrainian counteroffensive and Russian offensive plans for 2024.**
- **Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 18 that Russian forces have enough drones to launch daily strikes against Ukraine from different directions.**
- **The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is reportedly forming four new military transport aviation (VTA) regiments, although these efforts are likely aimed at reorganizing existing VTA units in support of Russia's force posturing rather than adding new capability in the short term.**
- **The Russian Government Commission on Legislative Activity supported a bill that would criminalize "Russophobia" abroad, likely as part of ongoing efforts to maintain and increase Russian influence in post-Soviet countries.**
- **Russian officials simplified requirements to obtain Russian citizenship for Belarusian, Kazakh, and Moldovan citizens amid continued hostility towards migrants in Russian society.**
- **The European Union (EU) adopted its 12th sanctions package in connection with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made a confirmed advance southwest of Donetsk City.**
- **Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia Spokesperson Eduard Basurin claimed that more than 25,000 Russian personnel are serving with Cossack volunteer formations in Ukraine as of December 18.**
- **Kremlin-appointed Children's Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova continues to deny Russian and Belarusian involvement in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied areas.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 18, 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

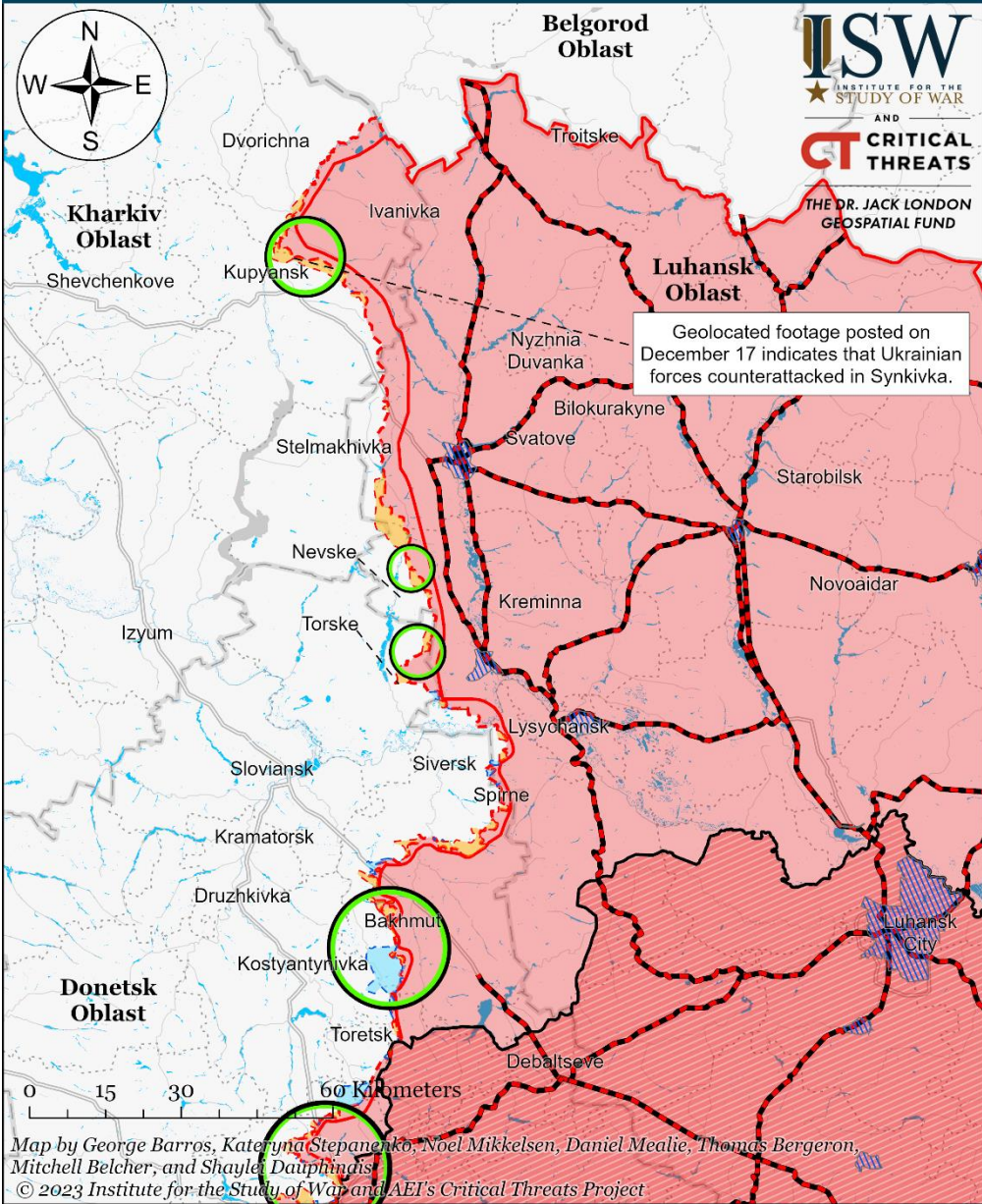
Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

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 forces continued attacking along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on December 18 and likely did not advance. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults northeast and east of Kupyansk near Synkivka (9km northeast of Kupyansk) and east of Petropavlivka (7km east of Kupyansk), northwest of Kreminna near Makiivka (23km northwest of Kreminna), west of Kreminna in the area east of Terny (17km east of Kreminna), and south of Kreminna near Spirne (30km south of Kreminna).[30] Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Military Administration Head Artem Lysohor stated that Russian forces concentrated the majority of their attacks on Makiivka and that heavy battles took place near Terny.[31] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are trying to break through Ukrainian defenses near Synkivka and the Serberyanske forest area south of Kreminna, but Ukrainian forces are counterattacking in these areas.[32] A Russian milblogger also claimed that fighting is ongoing near Ivanivka (20km southeast of Kupyansk).[33]

The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Synkivka, Lyman Pershyi (12km northeast of Kupyansk), Lake Lyman (northwest of Synkivka), Terny, and Zhytlivka (2k northwest of Kreminna).[34]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of December 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Geolocated footage posted on December 17 indicates that Ukrainian forces counterattacked in Synkivka.

Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Mitchell Belcher, and Shayle Dauphinais
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- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

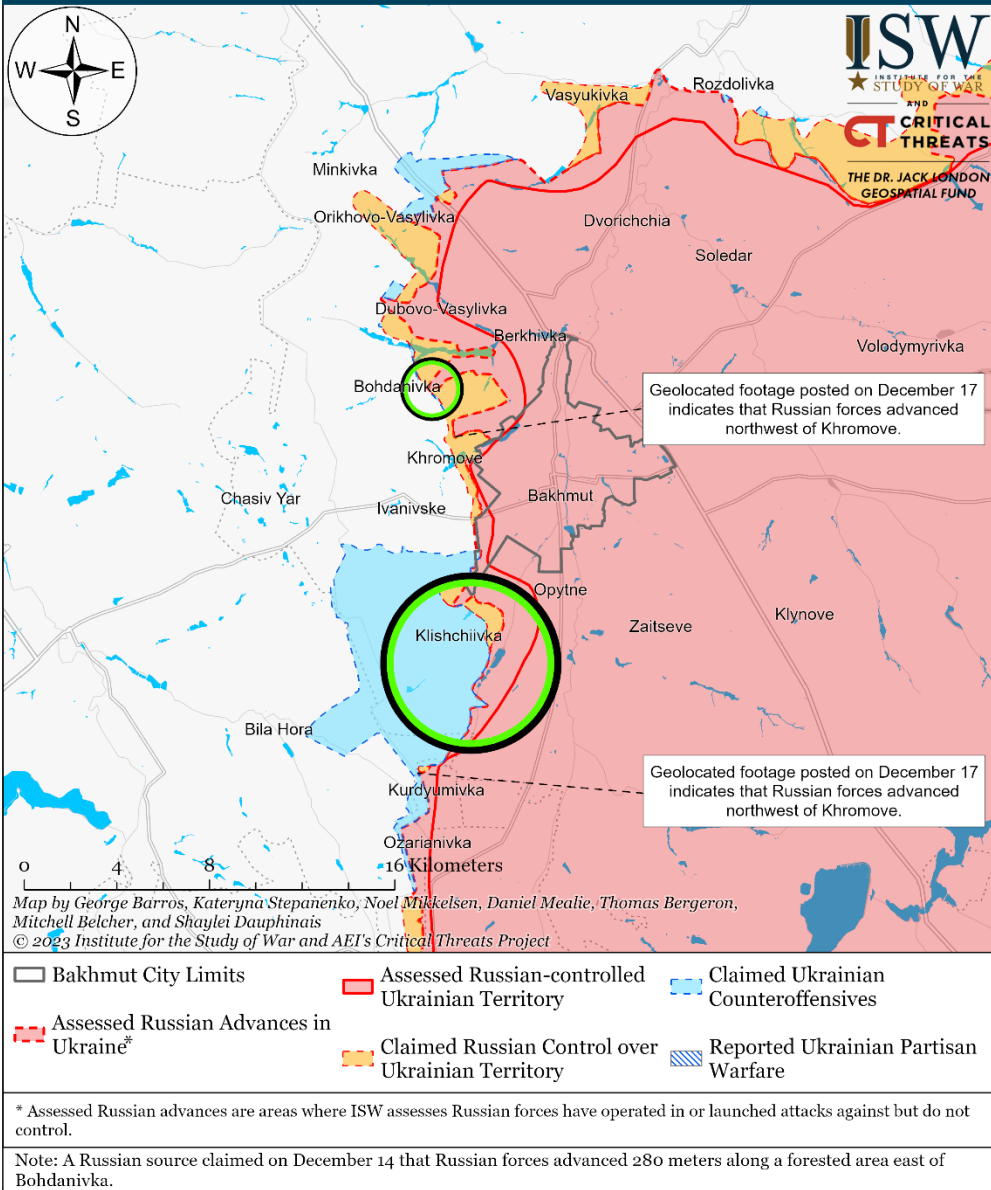
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

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

Russian forces continued attacks near Bakhmut on December 18 but did not make confirmed advances. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced towards Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) and Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut) and captured additional positions on the heights west of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[35] The Russian MoD published footage claiming to show elements of the Russian 98th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division capturing a Ukrainian position northwest of Bakhmut.[36] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled up to 17 Russian attacks near Bohdanivka, Klishchiivka, and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[37] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that elements of the 72nd Motorized Rifle Brigade (3rd Army Corps) unsuccessfully attacked near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.[38]

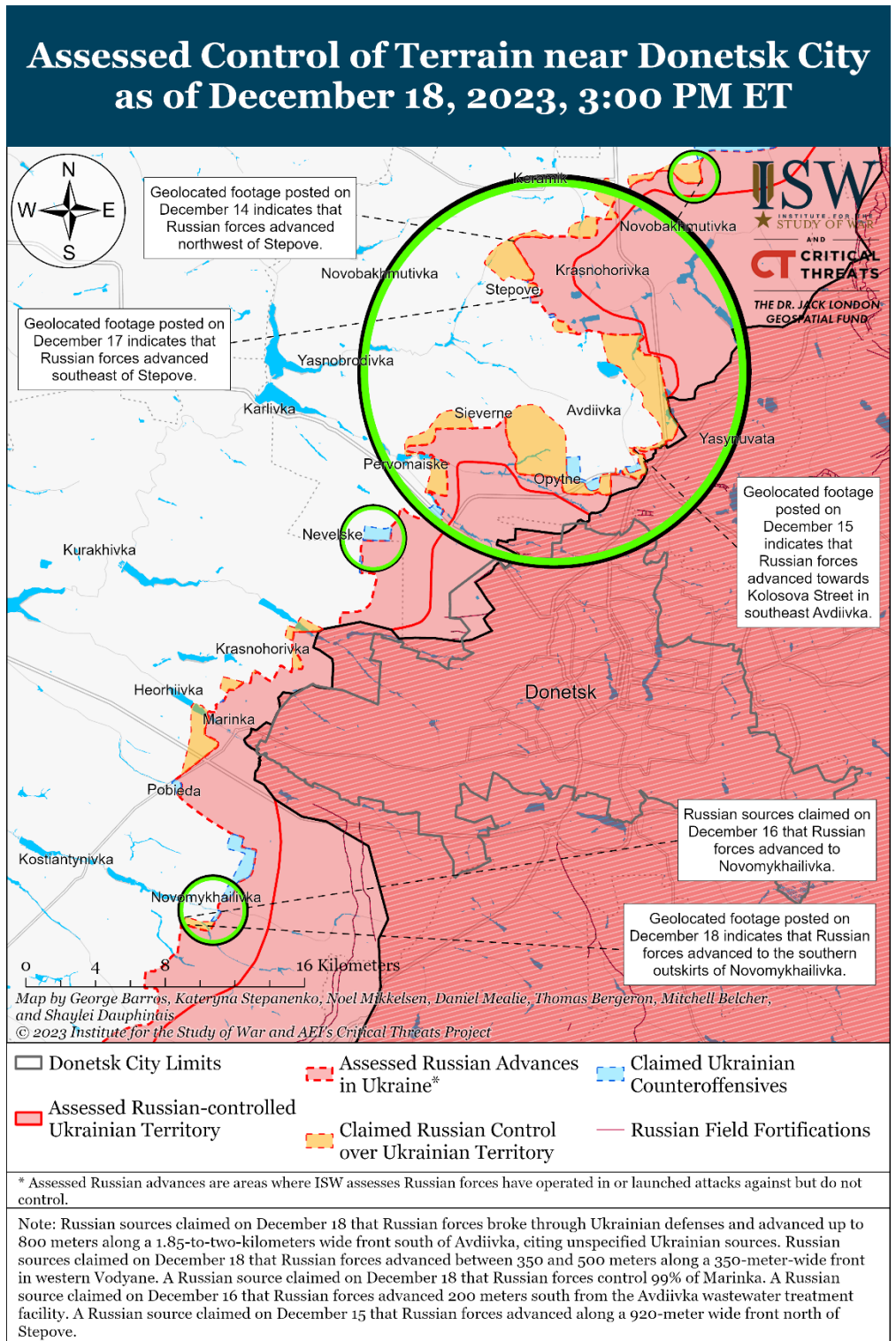
Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Bakhmut on December 18. The Russian MoD claimed that elements of the Russian Southern Grouping of Forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Bilohorivka (20km northeast of Bakhmut), Kurdyumivka (13km southwest of Bakhmut), Shumy (23km southwest of Bakhmut and just northwest of Horlivka), and Pivdenne (24km southwest of Bakhmut and immediately northwest of Horlivka).[39] A Russian milblogger claimed on December 17 that elements of the Russian 137th Guards VDV Regiment (106th Guards VDV Division) repelled Ukrainian attacks near Soledar (11km northeast of Bakhmut).[40]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of December 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian forces continued offensive operations near Avdiivka on December 18 but did not make confirmed advances. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced up to 800 meters in depth north and northwest of Opytne (4km south of Bakhmut) and up to 400 to 500 meters in depth west of Vodyane (7km southwest of Avdiivka).[41] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled at least 31 Russian attacks east of Novobakhmutivka (7km north of Avdiivka); south of Tonenke (5km west of Avdiivka); and near Stepove (3km northwest of Avdiivka), Avdiivka, Sieverne (6km west of Avdiivka), Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka), and Nevelske (15km west of Avdiivka).[42] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces also attacked near the Avdiivka Coke Plant (just northwest of Avdiivka) and the industrial zone southwest of Avdiivka.[43] A

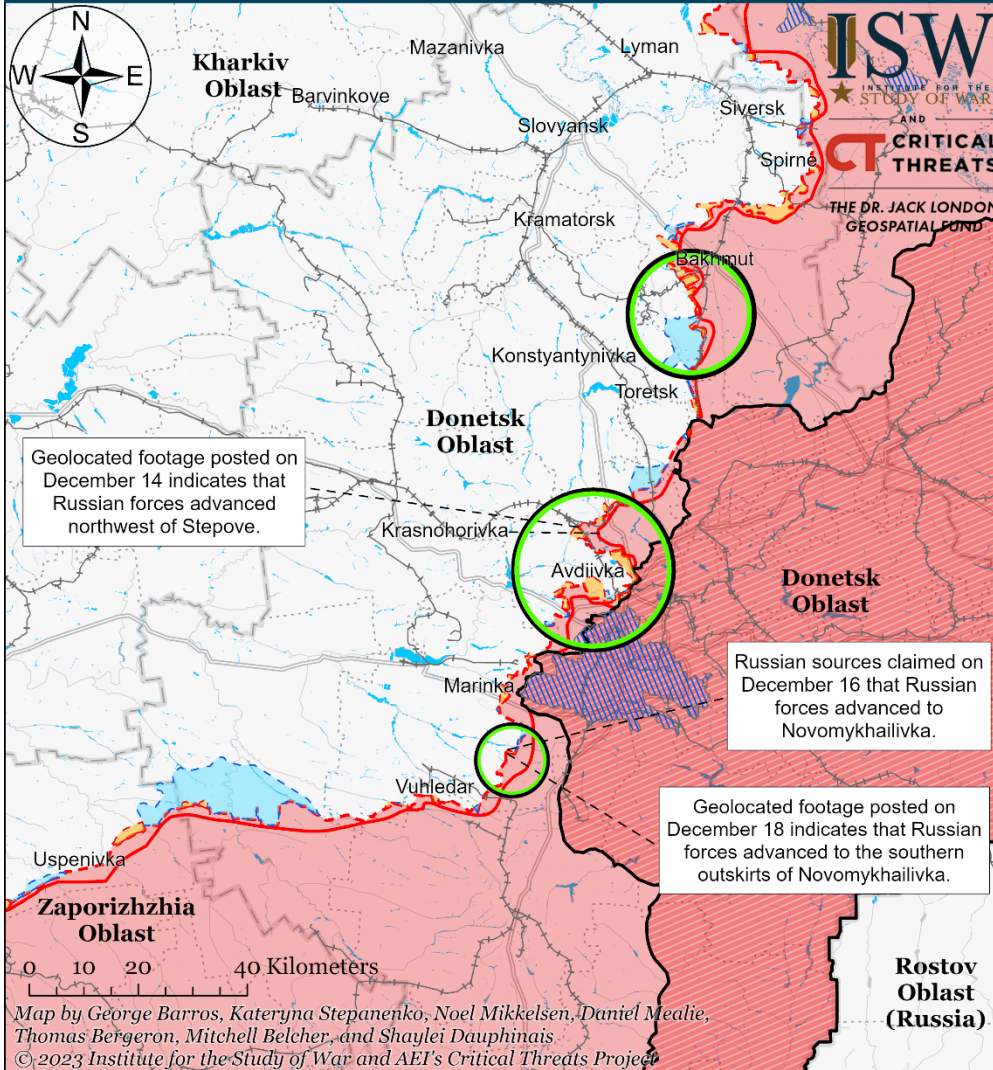
Russian milblogger noted that poor weather conditions, including thick fog and ice, continue to impede Russian and Ukrainian ground activity around Avdiivka.[44]



Russian forces continued ground attacks west and southwest of Donetsk City on December 18 and made a confirmed advance. Geolocated footage published on December 18 indicates that Russian

forces marginally advanced along the southern outskirts of Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City).[45] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced further west of Marinka towards Kurakhove (25km west of Donetsk City and 13km west of Marinka).[46] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces also attacked near Pobieda (5km southwest of Donetsk City).[47] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled at least 12 Russian attacks near Novomykhailivka.[48] Mashovets stated that elements of the Russian 33rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (20th Motorized Rifle Division, 8th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) attacked north of Novomykhailivka.[49] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Marinka (just west of Donetsk City) and Novomykhailivka.[50]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of December 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



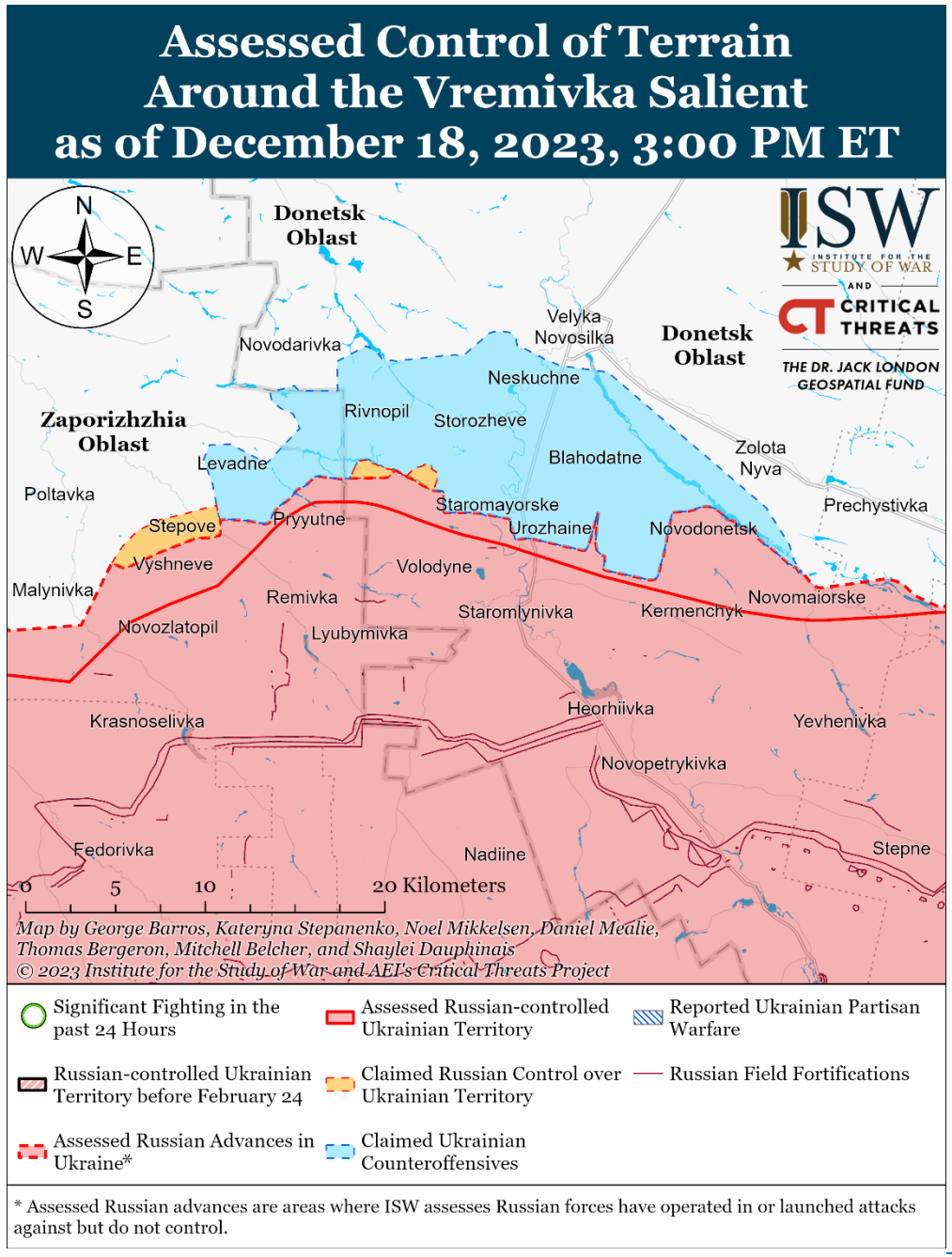
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- +— Major Railroads
- 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: Russian sources claimed on December 18 that Russian forces broke through Ukrainian defenses and advanced up to 800 meters along a 1.85-to-two-kilometers wide front south of Avdiivka, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources. Russian sources claimed on December 18 that Russian forces advanced between 350 and 500 meters along a 350-meter-wide front in western Vodyane. A Russian source claimed on December 18 that Russian forces control 99% of Marinka.

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

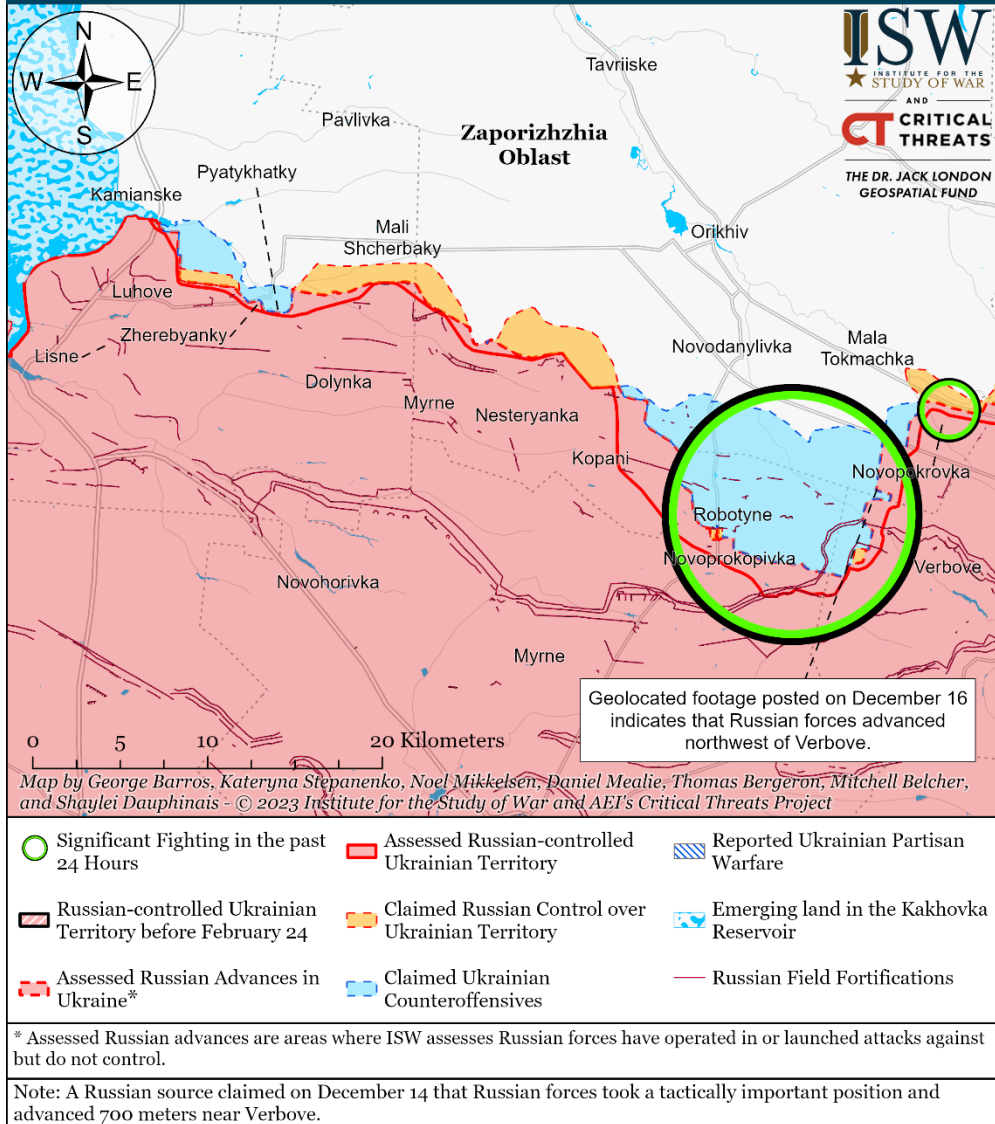
Neither Russian nor Ukrainian sources reported Russian or Ukrainian ground attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area on December 18.



Russian forces continued ground attacks in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on December 18 but did not make confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Robotyne, west of Verbove (9km west of Robotyne), and west of Novoprokovka (13km northeast of Robotyne).[51] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets claimed that

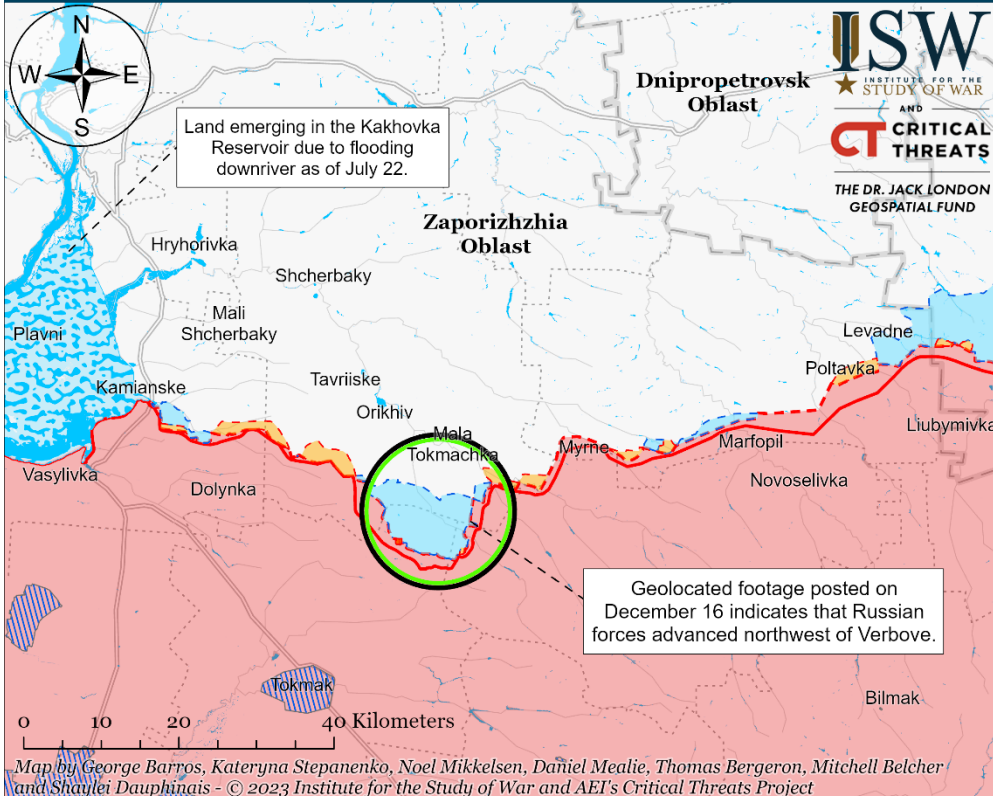
Russian units of the 234th and 237th Airborne (VDV) Regiments (both of the 76th VDV Division) advanced 800 meters northwest of Robotyne.[52] Mashovets also claimed that elements of the Russian 56th and 108th VDV Regiments (both of the 7th VDV Division) advanced 400 meters on the northwestern outskirts of Verbove.[53] ISW has not observed visual evidence confirming Mashovets' claims, however. Mashovets also claimed that elements of the Russian 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) attacked northeast of Novoprokopivka (directly south of Robotyne) and that elements of the Russian 108th VDV Regiment attacked southeast of Novopokrovka.[54] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked west of Robotyne and east of Novoprokopivka.[55] Another milblogger claimed that Russian forces continue to attack north of Verbove in an attempt to capture advantageous heights.[56]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of December 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted unsuccessful ground attacks in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on December 18. The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks north of Novoprokopivka.[57] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian attacks near Verbove.[58]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of December 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

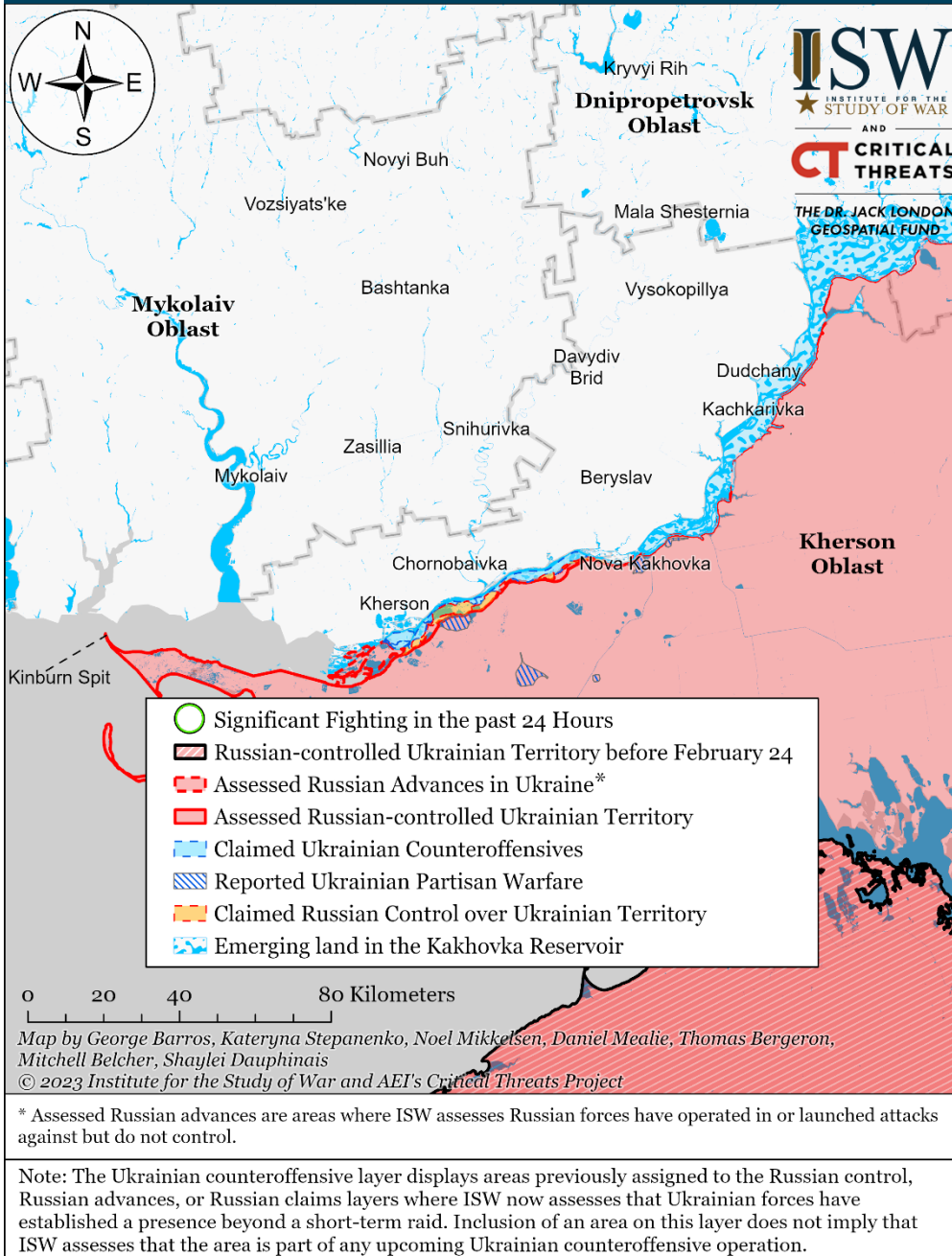
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir
- Assessed Russian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

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

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 14 that Russian forces took a tactically important position and advanced 700 meters near Verbove.

Ukrainian forces maintain positions in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast and Russian forces recently made marginal advances in the area. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the east bank of the Dniro River in Kherson Oblast.[59] Geolocated footage published on December 18 indicates that Russian forces marginally advanced in Krynyky (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dniro River).[60] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces assaulted Ukrainian positions in forest areas near Krynyky.[61] Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting was ongoing near Krynyky and that Russian forces started using armored vehicles near the settlement.[62] Footage published on December 18 purportedly shows a Ukrainian drone striking a Russian T-90 main battle tank near Krynyky.[63] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces continue to suffer from poor counterbattery, lateral communication, and evacuation capabilities.[64]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia Spokesperson Eduard Basurin claimed that more than 25,000 Russian personnel are serving with Cossack volunteer formations in Ukraine as of

December 18.[65] Basurin claimed that there were only 6,000 personnel in Cossack volunteer formations in December 2022.[66] Basurin claimed that Cossack volunteers trained under unspecified elements of the Russian Western Military District (WMD) and then deployed to Ukraine, where they initially formed the 6th Guards Motorized Cossack Rifle Regiment, the BARS-18 (Russian Combat Reserve) detachment, and the Aksai detachment.[67] Russian state-affiliated outlet *Top War* claimed that the volunteer Cossack assault corps is currently comprised of the 6th Guards Motorized Cossack Rifle Brigade (formerly regiment) and four additional volunteer brigades: the “Don” Cossack Brigade, the “Siberia” Cossack Brigade, the “Volga” Cossack Brigade, and the “Terek” Cossack Brigade.[68] The “Don” Cossack Brigade reportedly encompasses the “Aksai,” “Egorlyk,” “Manych,” and “Khooper” detachments.[69] The “Siberia” Cossack Brigade reportedly encompasses the “Yenisei,” Irtysh,” and “Angara” detachments.[70] The “Volga” Cossack Brigade reportedly consists of the “Listan,” “Pechora,” and “Lugan” detachments.[71] The “Terek” Cossack Brigade reportedly consists of the “Skif,” “Baltika,” “Caspian,” and “Terek” detachments, the separate “Oskol” detachment, and the “Skali” training center.[72]

Russian officials are publicly issuing veteran certificates to Wagner Group personnel and providing military equipment to irregular forces, likely to show that they are addressing Russian President Vladimir Putin’s recent promises on these issues during his December 14 “Direct Line” forum. Russian sources amplified photos on December 18 of Russian Navy Deputy Commander-in-Chief Vice Admiral Nikolai Mikheev presenting combat veteran certificates to Wagner personnel at a Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation event.[73] Russian Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Viktor Yevtukhov was also present at the event.[74] Russian sources claimed that the Defenders of the Fatherland Foundation, a Kremlin created volunteer organization that provides support to Russian veterans, is currently processing 3,000 appeals from Wagner personnel about veteran certificates.[75] Putin notably interacted with a man who fought with an unspecified private military company (PMC) in Ukraine during his “Direct Line” forum on December 14 and promised that he would address the fighter’s concern about a lack of veteran certificates for Russian PMC personnel.[76] The Russian MoD published footage on December 18 showing Russian General Staff Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate Head Colonel General Yevgeny Burdinsky delivering the keys to more than 40 KAMAZ trucks, 90 anti-drone guns, and other anti-drone equipment to unspecified BARS volunteer detachments.[77] Putin similarly addressed Russian personnel during the “Direct Line” and promised to resolve issues with supplies.[78] The publicized delivery of supplies to BARS volunteer detachments, which have previously complained about being some of the least well provisioned Russian forces fighting in Ukraine, is likely meant to signal that the MoD is addressing these issues.[79]

The Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade (Pacific Fleet) has reportedly suffered very significant losses while fighting in Ukraine. *BBC’s Russia Service* and Russian opposition outlet *Mediazona* reported that it confirmed the deaths of 234 personnel of the Russian 155th Naval Infantry Brigade and that the brigade has likely suffered 1,450 personnel losses between those killed, missing, and wounded in Ukraine.[80] The 155th Naval Infantry Brigade reportedly suffered half of the 234 confirmed deaths during attritional assaults on Vuhledar, Donetsk Oblast during the Russian winter-spring 2023 offensive.[81] The 155th Naval Infantry Brigade reportedly had roughly 3,000 personnel in total at the outset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, although ISW has previously observed reports that Russian forces reconstituted the brigade as many as eight times since February 24, 2022.[82] A Russian milblogger posted footage on December 18 purporting to show elements of the 155th Naval Infantry Brigade still operating near Vuhledar.[83]

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

Nothing significant to report.

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-appointed Children’s Rights Commissioner Maria Lvova-Belova continues to deny Russian and Belarusian involvement in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children from occupied areas.[84] Lvova-Belova claimed that Russian authorities have facilitated the return of Ukrainian children and have established “humanitarian corridors” through Belarus.[85] Yale University’s Humanitarian Research Lab conducted an independent investigation published in February 2023 that found that Russian authorities have likely deported over 14,700 Ukrainian children to Russia.[86] The International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin and Lvova-Belova in March 2023 for war crimes involving the deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.[87] The European Parliament adopted a resolution in September 2023 recognizing that Belarus is involved in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children, and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC) suspended Belarus’ membership in December 2023 in connection with Belarus’ involvement in the deportation of Ukrainian children to Belarus.[88]

Russian and occupation authorities continue to deport children from occupied Ukraine to Russia under the guise of education programs. The Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Ministry of Education and Science stated on December 18 that the Russian Presidential Foundation for Cultural Initiatives and the Russian Agency for Social Technologies and Communication organized a trip for students from occupied Luhansk Oblast under the “Forum of Young Talents” project in Moscow.[89] The students reportedly visited Russian cultural and historical sites and attended the International Exhibition and Forum in Moscow.[90]

Russian occupation officials continue to expand occupation government structures as part of efforts to integrate these structures into the Russian government and legitimize occupation authorities. Kherson Oblast occupation head Vladimir Saldo stated on December 18 that Kherson Oblast occupation authorities are establishing a Kherson Oblast occupation accounts chamber that will help integrate occupied Kherson Oblast into the Russian legal and financial system.[91]

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Russian President Vladimir Putin’s false narrative that Russia does not threaten NATO countries and issued another threat to NATO.[92] Lavrov gave an interview with the Russian state TV channel *Pervyi Kanal* on December 18 in which he reemphasized Putin’s main points from his interview and address at the United Russia Party Congress on December 17. Lavrov dismissed Western concerns about the Russian threat to NATO and claimed that Russia has long settled all of its territorial disputes – including territorial disputes with Japan. Lavrov claimed that Russia will not be naïve again to Western objectives to strategically defeat Russia and implied that Russia is not interested in temporarily freezing the frontlines in Ukraine. Lavrov

reiterated Putin’s statements about the importance of defending Russia’s “sovereignty.” Lavrov issued a thinly-veiled threat towards NATO, claiming that Western discussions about allowing Ukrainian forces to use NATO airfields are “dangerous thoughts.”[93] Kremlin officials have routinely promoted similar information operations and threats about other Western-provided military aid to slow its provision, however.[94] ISW continues to assess that the Kremlin’s reassurances about Russia’s peaceful intentions toward NATO ring hollow given the Kremlin’s prior threats against NATO and Russia’s actual objective of dismantling the alliance.[95]

Putin addressed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Council of Heads of Government on December 18 by emphasizing his usual statements about the closeness of Russia to its post-Soviet neighbors.[96] Putin stated that close cultural relationships, spiritual closeness, extensive human contacts, and centuries-old common history of CIS countries are the foundation of the CIS integration processes.

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 announced on December 18 that the Belarusian General Staff is holding territorial defense training from December 18 to 22.[97]

A Russian source claiming to be affiliated with the Wagner Group amplified photos on December 18 claiming to show elements of the Belarusian 38th Separate Guards Airborne Assault Brigade participating in combat training exercises at an unspecified location.[98]

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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