

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 28, 2023

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December 28, 2023, 8pm 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 2:30pm ET on December 28. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 29 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

The *New York Times* (NYT) published an oped by a member of its editorial board calling for Ukraine to engage in negotiations with and cede territory to Russia after reports emerged that Russian President Vladimir Putin is using backchannels and intermediaries to signal his interest in a ceasefire. The oped largely ignores near-constant Kremlin public signaling of Russia's continued maximalist goals in Ukraine. The oped argues that Ukraine should not "pass up" this opportunity to possibly achieve a ceasefire despite the fact that there are multiple reasons to believe that Putin's pro-ceasefire signaling may not be sincere, such as Putin's demonstrated untrustworthiness and the possibility that he may intend to use time spent on prolonged negotiations to his political and military benefit.[1] The piece argues that Ukraine does not need to regain all its territory to emerge victorious from the war, but that a "strong, independent, prosperous, and secure" Western-oriented Ukraine is also a victory. The piece appeals to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky to engage in ceasefire negotiations and not see negotiations as a defeat, implicitly blaming Zelensky – not Putin – for the absence of serious negotiations.

The oped's argument implicitly relies on the assumption that Putin's reported backchannel communications more accurately reflect Putin's thoughts and desires than his – and other Kremlin officials' – constant public rhetoric. Kremlin rhetoric to both international and domestic audiences has repeatedly indicated that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine or the West in good faith and intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine – which are completely incompatible with a strong, independent, or secure Ukraine that is a part of the West. Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev gave an interview to Russian state outlet *RIA Novosti* on December 28, for example, in which he responded to a question about the possibility of negotiations in 2024 by stating that the war will continue and that Russia's goals in Ukraine remain the "disarmament of Ukrainian troops" (alternative wording for the long-standing Russian demand for Ukraine's "demilitarization") and "the rejection by the current Ukrainian state of the ideology of neo-

Nazism (alternative wording for the Kremlin’s repeated demands for Ukraine’s “denazification”).[2] Medvedev re-emphasized that the war would continue until Russia achieves regime change in Ukraine and also claimed that Odesa, Dnipropetrovsk, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv (none of which Russia currently occupies) are “Russian cities” and complained that they are still marked as Ukrainian cities on maps. Medvedev’s comments reinforce copious other indications that Russia intends to annex or militarily occupy territory beyond the current line of contact and beyond the four (illegally) annexed oblasts and Crimea.[3] Medvedev also claimed that Russia has always been open to negotiations with Ukraine and that negotiations can continue up until the “complete defeat and capitulation” of Ukraine – in line with ISW’s long-standing assessment that Russia does not intend to engage in serious negotiations with Ukraine in good faith and that Russia’s maximalist objectives, which are tantamount to Ukrainian and Western surrender, are unchanged.[4] The Ukrainian government, on the other hand, has consistently been working on its 10-point peace plan, and Zelensky stated on December 19 that Ukraine is preparing to be able to present the peace formula to Russia in the future.[5]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made a number of statements on December 28 that also run contrary to the reported backchannel messaging on which the NYT oped and similar arguments rely. Lavrov claimed on December 28 in another interview with *RIA Novosti* that “hints and leaks” in the Western media show that the West wants to look for a way to end the war in Ukraine while still declaring a Ukrainian victory – possibly in response to Western reports about Russia’s willingness to negotiate.[6] Lavrov also claimed that Ukrainian demands for the return of its 1991 borders amount to “demands for genocide.” Lavrov claimed that Ukrainians and Russians are “one people” and lamented the fall of the Soviet Union, after which millions of Russians were left outside of the borders of the Russian Federation--echoing many statements that Putin has made.[7] Lavrov’s statements appear to invoke the Kremlin’s concept of “compatriots abroad” that is used to justify Russia’s definition of its “sovereignty” and right to defend ethnic Russians and Russian speakers beyond its borders. The Kremlin has recently returned to its “compatriots abroad” narrative to justify its war in Ukraine and when discussing Russia’s imperial reconquests in and beyond Ukraine.[8]

The oped’s focus on the need for Ukraine to cede its land, finally, obscures the horrors that the Russian occupation is inflicting on the Ukrainian people living on that land. Russian forces and administrations have been engaging in large-scale and deliberate ethnic cleansing campaigns, forcibly and illegally deporting Ukrainians to Russia and replacing them with Russians and migrants to Russia.[9] Russian administrations have illegally deported tens of thousands of Ukrainian children to Russia under various schemes, including causing Russian families to adopt them.[10] Russian administrations are systematically working to eliminate the Ukrainian language, culture, history, and ethnicity in the areas that Russian forces occupy, as ISW has repeatedly documented.[11] Many of these activities appear to violate the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and deserve at least a mention in discussions about how Ukraine’s president should cede Ukraine’s land and people to Russia.[12]

Russia has officially deployed a battalion formed of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) to the frontline in Ukraine, further confirming a myriad of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs. Russian state-controlled outlets *RIA Novosti* and *Rossiya-1* reported on December 28 that soldiers from the “Bogdan Khmelnytsky” battalion, formed of Ukrainian POWs and subordinated to the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Ministry of Internal Affairs “Kaskad” formation, took part in their first engagement against Ukrainian forces near

Urozhaine, western Donetsk Oblast.[13] Russian media had previously reported on October 27 that the battalion recruited around 70 Ukrainian POWs from penal colonies in Russia and sent them to train before deploying to the western Donetsk Oblast area in early November.[14] ISW continues to assess that the use of Ukrainian POWs in the “Bogdan Khmelnytsky” battalion is likely a violation of The Geneva Convention on POWs, which prohibits the use of POWs in military activities on the side of the power that has captured them and states that “no POW may at any time be sent to or detained in areas where he may be exposed to the fire of the combat zone” and shall not “be employed on labor which is of an unhealthy or dangerous nature.”[15]

Recent incidents of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs likely implicate elements of the now notorious 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Division in the abuse of POWs.[16] Drone footage from December 27 showed Russian forces executing three Ukrainian POWs near Robotyne, in western Zaporizhia Oblast, and footage from December 13 additionally showed Russian forces in this area using Ukrainian POWs as human shields.[17] The Ukrainian Prosecutor General verified the authenticity of the December 27 video on December 28 and suggested that elements of the Russian 76th VDV Division are likely responsible for the executions, considering that the 76th is the principal Russian formation operating near Robotyne.[18] *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* similarly suggested that the December 13 footage implicates elements of the 234th VDV Regiment of the 76th VDV Division in the crime of using Ukrainian POWs as human shields in the same area.[19] Various independent investigations in 2022 confirmed that the 76th VDV Division, particularly its 234th Regiment, participated in a deliberate “cleansing operation” that massacred Ukrainian civilians in Bucha, Kyiv Oblast.[20] The exact composition of the 234th VDV Regiment has likely changed since the massacres at Bucha, the continued participation of this regiment in apparent war crimes suggests that the wider VDV command may be encouraging, or at least not actively working to prevent, such practices as part of its *modus operandi*.

The Russian military command will reportedly disband the "Kaskad" operational combat tactical formation of the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) by December 31, 2023, likely as part of Russia's ongoing force formalization campaign. The DNR MVD formed Kaskad in 2017, and Kaskad has operated semi-independently as a Russian irregular formation since.[21] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on December 26 that the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) would disband one of “the most experienced, combat-ready, and well-coordinated units” in Donbas after the Russian General Staff ordered Kaskad to withdraw from its positions and disband by December 31.[22] The milblogger added on December 27 that the Russian military command had already begun withdrawing Kaskad elements from the frontlines, including 90 of its artillery systems and drone reconnaissance elements.[23] The milblogger added that Kaskad had 9,000 total personnel and claimed that Russian officials are trying to disband the formation ahead of the New Year holiday to deflect from their true intentions of seizing Kaskad’s property and assets. The milblogger claimed that many accused him of lying, but implied that he is in contact with Kaskad personnel and observed that Kaskad’s press service did not attempt to deny or downplay his original report. A Russian social media user, claiming to have connections with Kaskad elements, claimed that Kaskad is not being disbanded but rather reformed into a new structure that is not affiliated with the DNR MVD, which cannot have a police force fighting in armed combat on the frontlines according to Russian law.[24] The DNR’s “Vostok” battalion, which is part of the Kaskad formation and fighting on the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border, also noted that officials are currently deciding Kaskad’s and Vostok’s fates and noted that Kaskad is fully dependent on Russian military logistics.[25] Vostok added that the question of

Kaskad's existence first emerged after Russia (illegally) annexed part of the occupied Donetsk Oblast, which required the dissolution of the DNR MVD as an independent entity in order to fully integrate into Russian security structures under Russian law. Another milblogger claimed that the dissolution of Kaskad is irrelevant because its elements hid behind regular forces near Velyka Novosilka area in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area and were not combat effective on the battlefield.[26]

The dissolution of Kaskad is likely part of the Russian MoD's and the Kremlin's effort to formalize control over some irregular forces, such as proxy militias. Russia had undertaken similar efforts to restructure and integrate the DNR's and Luhansk People's Republic's (LNR) 1st and 2nd Army Corps in early 2023, which in some cases meant eliminating individual units' autonomy, replacing commanders, and installing rules and regulations observed by the Russian Armed Forces.[27] The Russian MoD may offer Kaskad personnel the option to sign military contracts to join formalized DNR units or offer these forces contract for volunteer military service. Both scenarios, however, will likely have implications for Kaskad's ability to maintain its pre-formalization structure and may degrade its combat effectiveness.

Ukrainian military officials revealed that Russian forces launched about 7,400 missiles and 3,900 Shahed drone strikes against Ukraine since launching the full-scale invasion.

Ukrainian Armed Forces Center for Strategic Communications (StratCom) stated on December 28 that Russia has launched about 7,400 missiles against Ukraine since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, including around 2,470 S-300/400 missiles, 900 Iskander-M missiles, and 48 Kinzhal missiles.[28] Ukrainian StratCom also reported that Russian forces have launched about 3,700 Shahed drones against Ukraine, of which Ukrainian forces have destroyed about 2,900. Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on December 28 that three Russian Kalibr cruise missile carriers — including two unspecified submarines and the *Admiral Makarov* Admiral Grigorovich-class frigate — sortied in the Black Sea on December 28 and warned of an increased risk of Russian missile strikes because Russian missile carriers have not sortied in the Black Sea for “a very long time.”[29] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces launched eight Shahed-131/136 drones from Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, and that Ukrainian forces shot down seven drones over Dnipropetrovsk, Kirovohrad, and Zaporizhia oblasts on the night of December 27 to 28.[30]

Russian mines continue to threaten civilian vessels in the Black Sea but will likely not deter civilian vessel usage of the Black Sea Humanitarian Corridor.

The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported on December 28 that a Russian naval mine damaged a civilian vessel sailing under the Panamanian flag on the Black Sea while the ship was traveling to a Danube River port to pick up grain, causing a fire on the vessel and injuring two crew members.[31] The Ukrainian Southern Operational Command reported that stormy weather often increases the risk of vessels hitting mines and noted the importance of continued international support for demining the Black Sea.[32] US Ambassador to Ukraine Bridget Brink reported that as of December 305 civilian vessels have transported over 10 million tons of grain and other cargo through the civilian corridor in the Black Sea, presumably since the first civilian vessel successfully departed from a Ukrainian port through the corridor on August 15.[33] Civilian ships will very likely continue to use the corridor despite the risks of Russian mines, but Russian militarization of the Black Sea continues to pose a risk to civilian ships that are carrying out critical grain transportation tasks. Turkey, Romania, and Bulgaria reportedly plan to sign an agreement on demining Russian naval mines that drift into the western Black Sea in January 2024.[34]

The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a \$250 million security assistance package for Ukraine on December 27.[35] The package includes additional air defense capabilities such as munitions for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS) and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles; artillery ammunition including 155mm and 105mm rounds and over 15 million small arms ammunition rounds; and anti-tank weapons such as Javelin and AT-4 anti-armor systems.[36]

Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin acknowledged the end of his presidential campaign after failing to register with the Russian Central Elections Committee (CEC) on December 27. The Russian Strelkov (Igor Girkin) Movement (RDS), which had been organizing Girkin's campaign on his behalf due to his imprisonment, announced on December 27 that Russian authorities did not allow Girkin to meet with a notary to verify the signatures supporting his presidential nomination.[37] RDS published a statement from Girkin on December 28 in which he said that he "had no illusions" about succeeding in a "layered system of obstacles created by the system itself." [38] Girkin claimed that Russia is approaching a time of troubles (likely referencing the Russian Time of Troubles political crisis in the early 17th century that preceded the rise of the Romanov dynasty) and that Russia's ability to emerge from its hardships depends on its ability to unite and organize.[39] Girkin had announced his intent to run in the 2024 Russian presidential election on November 19.[40]

The Russian MoD rewarded prominent Russian milbloggers for their contribution to the "military-patriotic" and "military-political" sphere, mirroring previous Kremlin efforts to pander to and co-opt to the wider Russian milblogger community. Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov reported on December 28 that the Russian MoD gave awards to *Rybar* project head Mikhail Zvinchuk and creative director Valeria Zvinchuk for their efforts in military-patriotic education and military-political work for the Russian Armed Forces.[41] Russian President Vladimir Putin had previously given Zvinchuk the Russian Order of Merit of the Fatherland Second Class on November 16 for Zvinchuk's efforts in supporting the Russian war in Ukraine.[42] ISW assessed at the time that Putin's award to Zvinchuk, whose *Rybar* channel has amassed 1.19 million followers as of December 28, 2023, was likely an attempt to gain control over the often-critical milblogger information space.[43] The tone of *Rybar's* coverage has notably become more complacent towards Russian military failures in Ukraine and less overtly critical of the Russian MoD since the fall of 2022 when Zvinchuk began appearing as a featured military analyst on Russian state television.[44] The fact that Zvinchuk now holds both MoD and presidential awards suggests that the Russian leadership seeks to co-opt and control milblogger reporting on the war in Ukraine and hopes to use Zvinchuk's example to incentivize similar Kremlin-favorable reporting by other milbloggers.

Key Takeaways:

- **The *New York Times* (NYT) published an oped by a member of its editorial board calling for Ukraine to engage in negotiations with and cede territory to Russia after reports emerged that Russian President Vladimir Putin is using backchannels and intermediaries to signal his interest in a ceasefire. The oped largely ignores near-constant Kremlin public signaling of Russia's continued maximalist goals in Ukraine.**

- **Russia has officially deployed a battalion formed of Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) to the frontline in Ukraine, further confirming a myriad of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs.**
- **Recent incidents of apparent Russian violations of the Geneva Convention on POWs likely implicate elements of the now notorious 76th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Division in the abuse of POWs.**
- **The Russian military command will reportedly disband the "Kaskad" operational combat tactical formation of the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) by December 31, 2023, likely as part of Russia's ongoing force formalization campaign.**
- **Ukrainian military officials revealed that Russian forces launched about 7,400 missiles and 3,900 Shahed drone strikes against Ukraine since launching the full-scale invasion.**
- **Russian mines continue to threaten civilian vessels in the Black Sea but will likely not deter civilian vessel usage of the Black Sea Humanitarian Corridor.**
- **The US Department of Defense (DoD) announced a \$250 million security assistance package for Ukraine on December 27.**
- **Imprisoned Russian ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin acknowledged the end of his presidential campaign after failing to register with the Russian Central Elections Committee (CEC) on December 27.**
- **The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) rewarded prominent Russian milbloggers for their contribution to the "military-patriotic" and "military-political" sphere, mirroring previous Kremlin efforts to pander to and co-opt to the wider Russian milblogger community.**
- **Ukrainian forces made a confirmed advance near Bakhmut, likely within the past week.**
- **Russian forces made confirmed advances northwest of Avdiivka, near Marinka, and south of Hulyaipole.**
- **The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) announced on December 28 that Russia has over 640,000 contract servicemen (*kontrakniki*), the first Russian announcement about the number of *kontrakniki* in the Russian Armed Forces since the start of the full-scale invasion.**
- **Russian occupation officials continue to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of medical necessity, despite an apparently growing number of cases of highly infectious diseases being transmitted among Ukrainian children *en route* to Russia.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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.

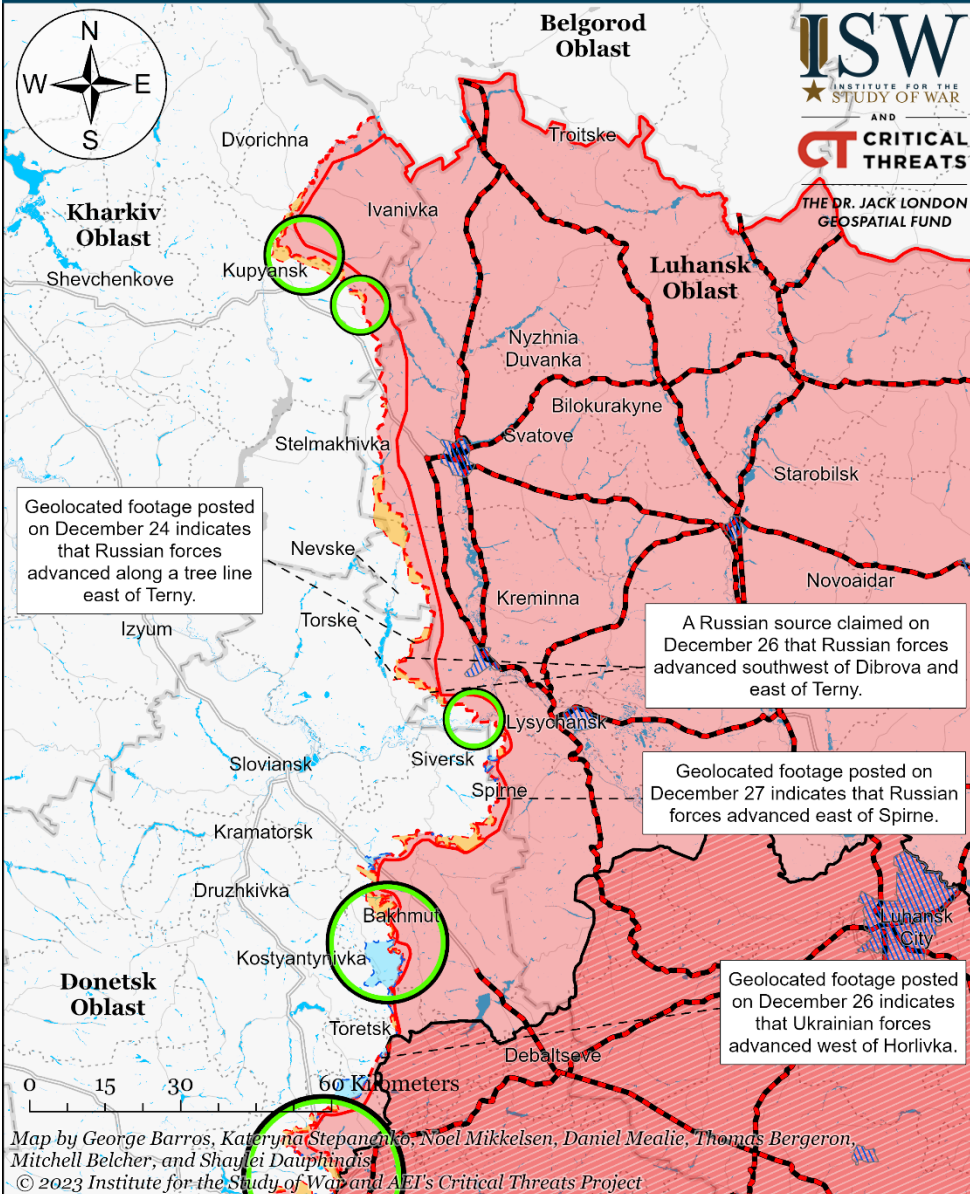
- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety 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 and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on December 28, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline.[45] One Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces captured two unspecified Ukrainian positions near Synkivka, although ISW has not yet observed visual evidence of this purported gain.[46] Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are moving forward slowly in the Kupyansk direction, prioritizing strikes on Ukrainian assets over making gains in ground assaults.[47] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported positional fighting northeast of Kupyansk near Synkivka, Ivanivka, and Lake Lyman (just north of Synkivka), and west of Kreminna near the Serebryanske forest area, Torske, Dibrova, and Hryhorivka.[48] Ukrainian military observer Yurii Butusov posted footage on December 28 of the aftermath of a Ukrainian strike on a building occupied by Russian forces in Kreminna.[49] Elements of the Russian 1st Guards Tank Army (Western Military District) and unspecified airborne (VDV) Divisions are reportedly operating in this area.[50]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of December 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- 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.

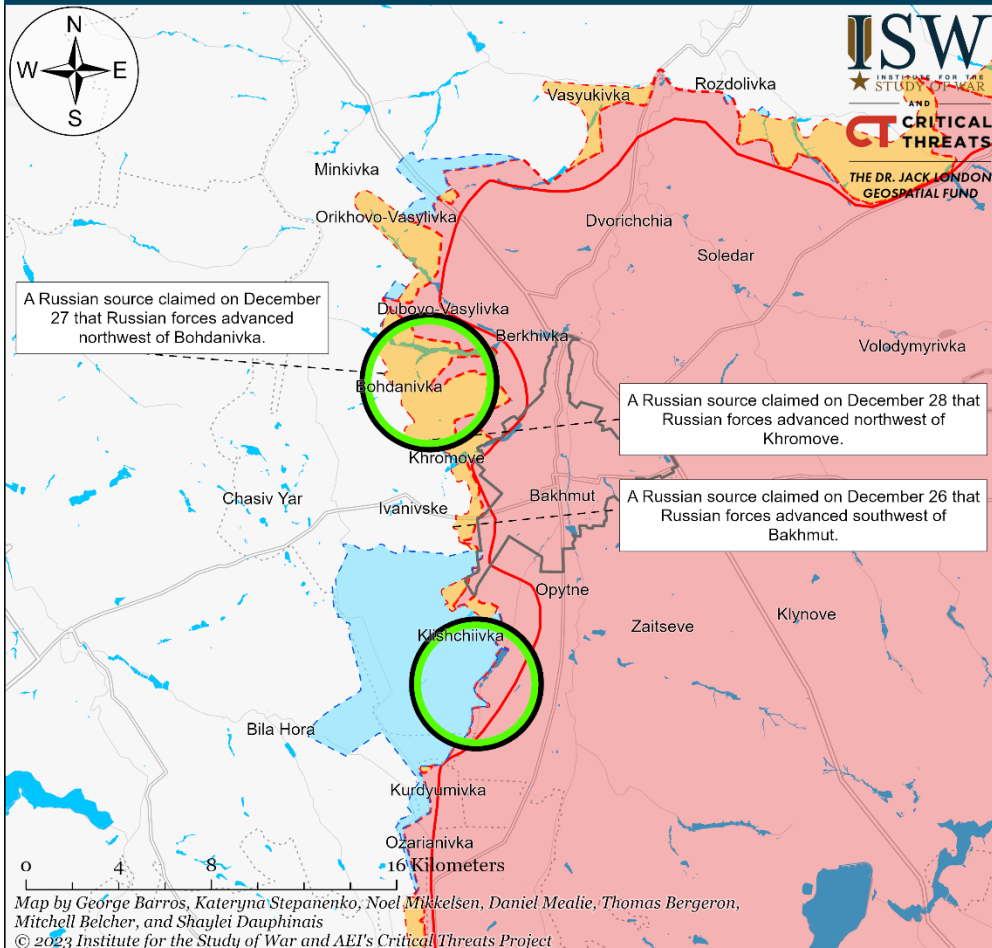
Note: A Russian source claimed on December 27 that Russian forces advanced up to three kilometers in the Serebryanske Forest. A Russian source claimed on December 26 that Russian forces advanced approximately one kilometer along a two-kilometers-wide front in the Terry and Yampolivka directions.

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 and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements north of Bakhmut on December 28 but did not make confirmed advances. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces marginally advanced near Spirne (northeast of Bakhmut) and unsuccessfully attacked near Vesele.[51] Elements of the Russian 123rd Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People’s Republic [LNR] Army Corps) reportedly continue operating near Berestove (northeast of Bakhmut), and elements of the Russian 106th Airborne (VDV) Division reportedly continue operating in the Soledar direction (northeast of Bakhmut).[52]

Ukrainian forces marginally advanced near Bakhmut, likely within the past week, and continued positional engagements with Russian forces on December 28. Geolocated footage published on December 20 indicates that Ukrainian forces marginally advanced southeast of Klishchiivka (southwest of Bakhmut).[53] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced north and east of Bohdanivka (northwest of Bakhmut) and toward Ivanivske (west of Bakhmut).[54] Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated that the intensity of fighting has decreased near Bakhmut but that Russian forces continue attempts to capture Bohdanivka, advance toward Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut), and regain lost positions near Klishchiivka and Andriivka (southwest of Bakhmut).[55] Several milbloggers noted that it is difficult for Russian forces to capture Bohdanivka because it is located in a lowland, which allows Ukrainian forces to exert fire control over Russian positions in the lowland area.[56] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional fighting is ongoing northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka and Khromove; west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske; and southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka, Andriivka and Kurdyumivka.[57] Elements of the Chechen “Shustry” Detachment of “Akhmat” Spetsnaz along with elements of the Russian 4th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd LNR Army Corps) reportedly continue to operate near Klishchiivka.[58] Elements of the Russian 331st VDV Regiment (98th VDV Division) and 102nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (150th Motorized Rifle Division, 8th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Southern Military District [SMD]) reportedly continue to operate near Bakhmut.[59]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of December 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Mitchell Belcher, and Shaylei Dauphinais
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- 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

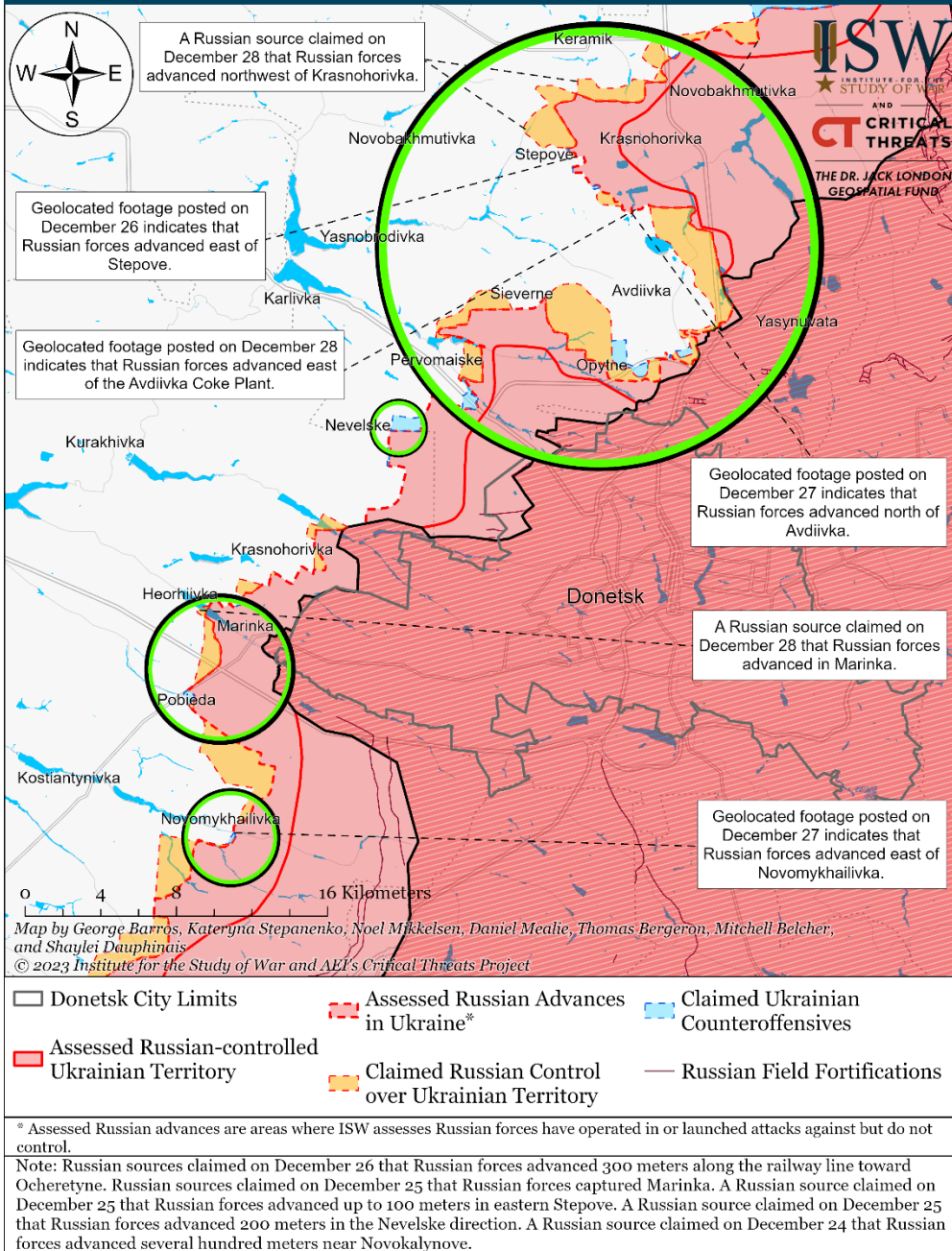
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 26 that Russian forces advanced up to 580 meters along a 660-meters-wide front near the cemetery northwest of Khromove. A Russian source claimed on December 26 that Russian forces advanced up to 200 meters along a 290-meters-wide front in the Bakhmut direction, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources. Russian sources claimed on December 24 that Russian forces advanced up to one-half kilometer toward Bohdanivka and in the adjacent forest belts.

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Horlivka on December 28. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked near Mayorske (northwest of Horlivka) and Niu York (west of Horlivka).[60] Elements of the 238th Artillery Brigade (8th CAA, SMD) reportedly continue operating near Horlivka.[61]

Russian forces recently made a marginal advance northwest of Avdiivka and continued positional engagements with Ukrainian forces on December 28. Geolocated footage published on December 28 indicates that Russian forces marginally advanced near the Avdiivka Coke Plant northwest of Avdiivka.[62] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced up to 800 meters from Sieverne (southwest of Avdiivka), near Ocheretyne along the railway line (northwest of Avdiivka), and in the industrial zone (southeast of Avdiivka).[63] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional battles continued northwest of Avdiivka east of Novobakhmutivka and near Stepove and south of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske, Nevelske, and Sieverne.[64] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Russian forces have doubled their use of loitering munitions and increased the number of glide bomb strikes with Su-34 and Su-35 aircraft in the Tavriisk direction, which includes Avdiivka, western Donetsk Oblast, and Zaporizhia Oblast.[65]

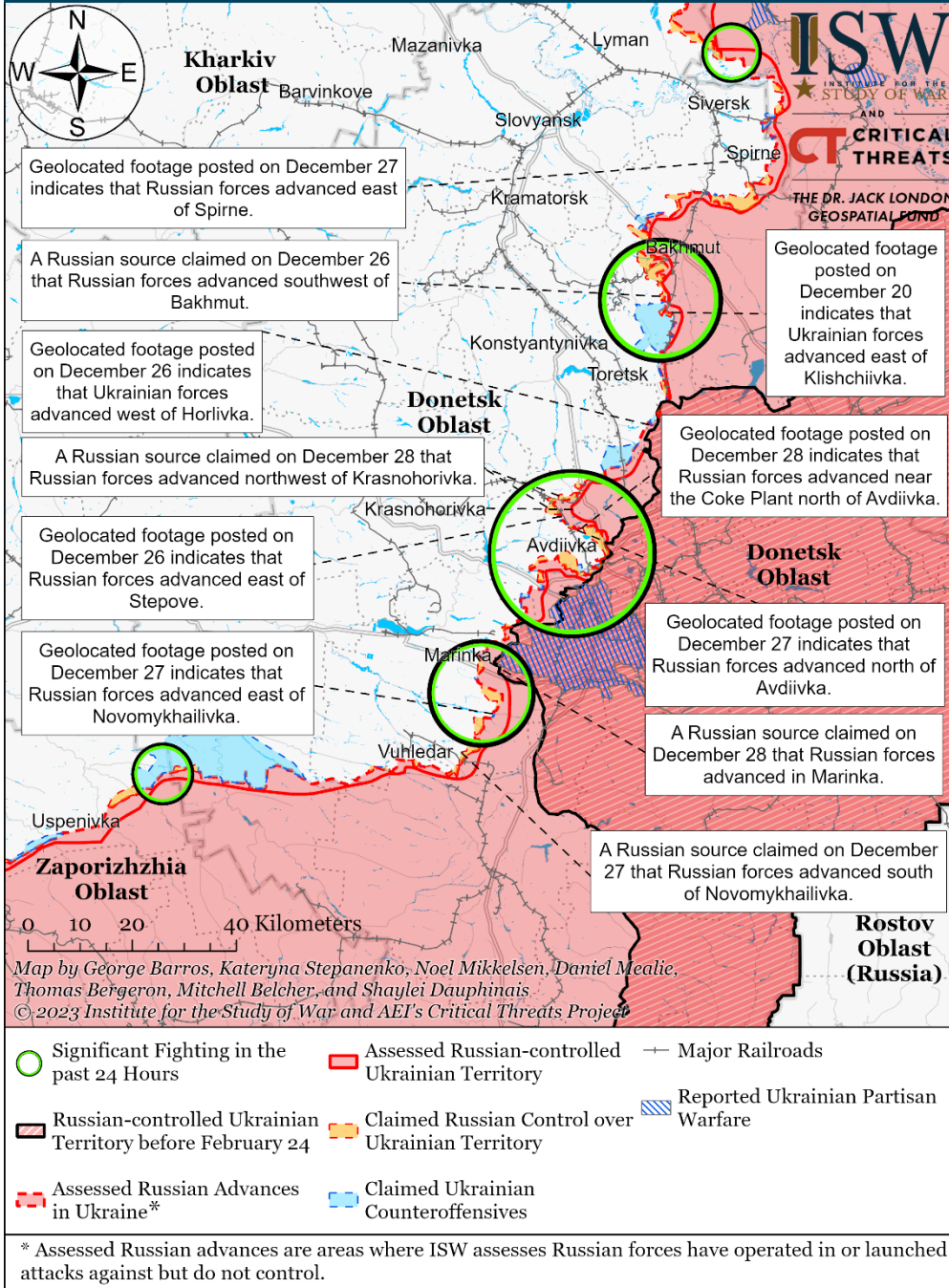
Assessed Control of Terrain near Donetsk City as of December 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian forces reportedly advanced near Marinka on December 28 and continued positional engagements with Ukrainian forces. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced near Marinka and made unspecified tactical advances near Pobieda (southwest of Donetsk City).[66] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that Russian forces attacked west of Donetsk City near Marinka and Heorhiivka and southwest of Donetsk City near Novomykhailivka and Pobieda.[67] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that subordinate units of

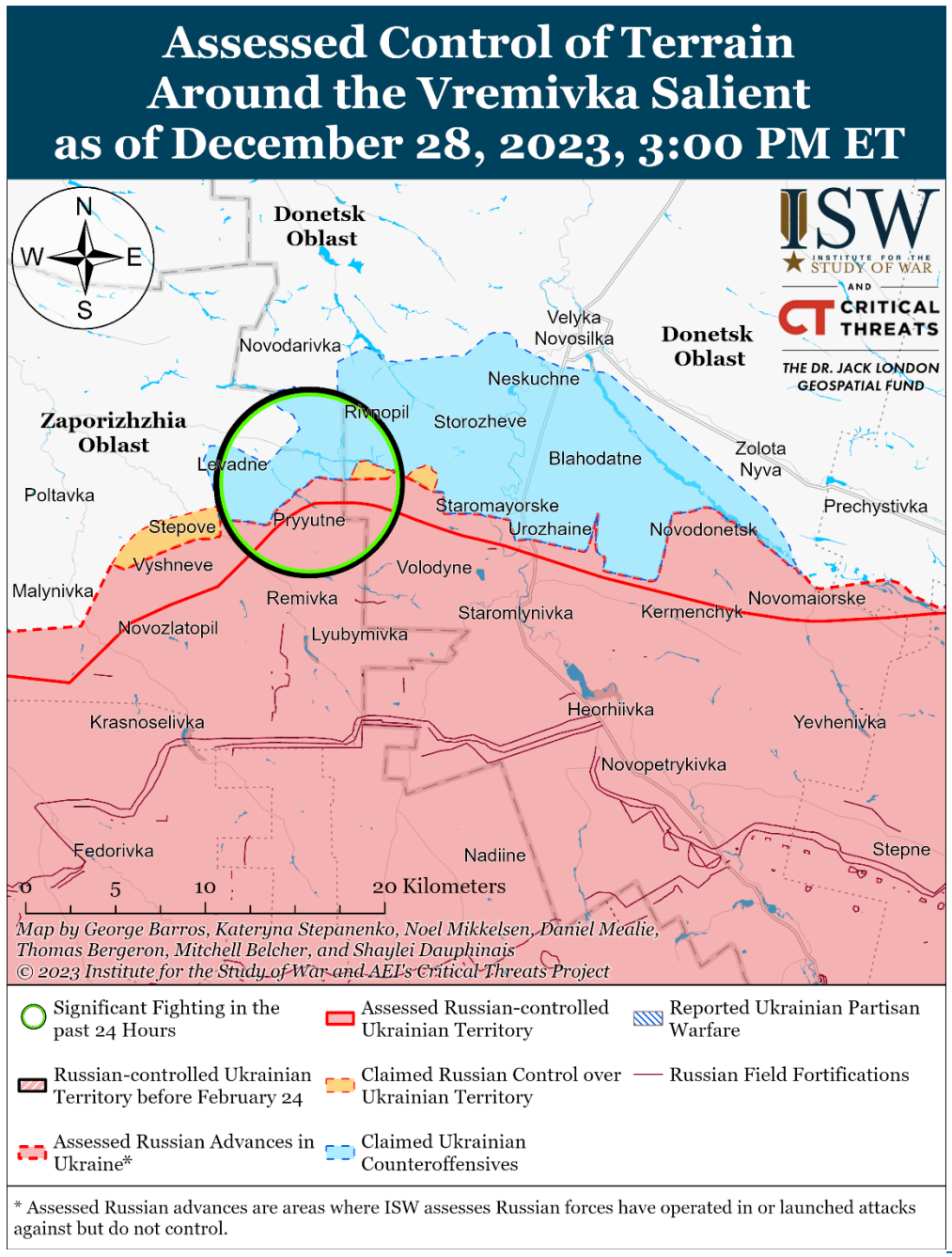
Russian 150th Motorized Rifle Division (8th CAA, SMD) including elements of the Russian 103rd Motorized Rifle Regiment and 163rd Tank Regiment are operating near Marinka and that elements of the 33rd and 255th Motorized Rifle Regiments are operating in the Marinka-Pobieda and Oleksandrivka-Novomykhailivka directions.[68] Mashovets also noted that individual units of the 40th and 155th Naval Infantry Brigades (Pacific Fleet, Eastern Military District) and the Russian 7th Separate Operational Battalion (“Kaskad” Operational Tactical Combat Formation of the Donetsk People’s Republic [DNR] Ministry of Internal Affairs [MVD]) are redeploying to the Novomykhailivka direction.[69]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of December 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked in the Donetsk-Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area south of Novodarivka (southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[70] Elements of the Russian 34th Separate Motorized Mountain Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) are reportedly operating in the Donetsk-Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area.[71]

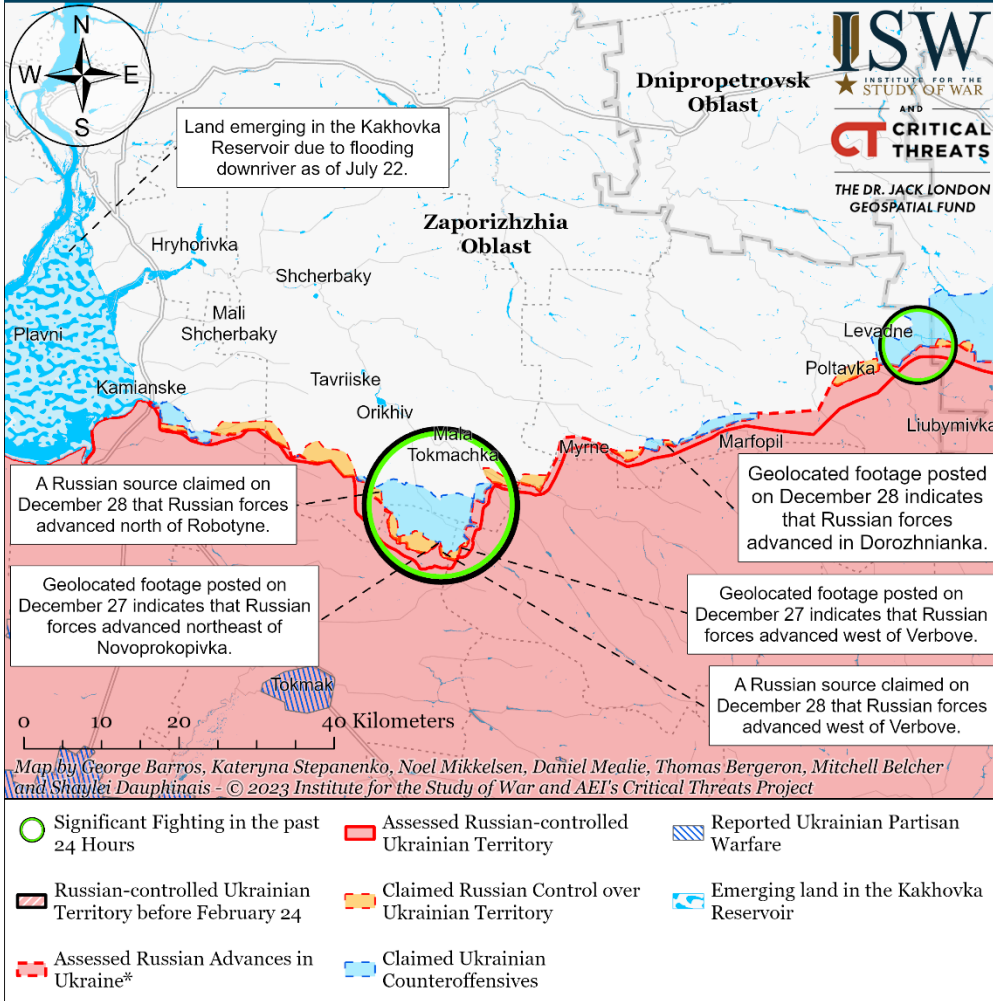


Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance in eastern Zaporizhzhia Oblast and reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast. Recently posted geolocated footage confirms that Russian forces occupy Dorozhnyanka, south of Hulyaipole.[72] Russian forces have claimed to be operating in Dorozhnyanka since December 2022.[73] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced west and northwest of Robotyne and along the Robotyne-Verbove line.[74] One Russian milblogger,

citing alleged unspecified Ukrainian military analysts, claimed that Russian forces advanced west of Robotyne and along the Novoprokopivka-Verbove line (south and east of Robotyne).[75] A Russian source claimed that Ukrainian forces secured a small foothold north of Verbove on December 27.[76] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of any of these claims, however. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional engagements occurred near Verbove and Robotyne.[77] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted a glide bomb strike on Orikhiv.[78] Elements of the Russian 1430th Motorized Rifle Regiment of Territorial Troops (TRV) are reportedly operating in the Zaporizhzhia direction.[79]



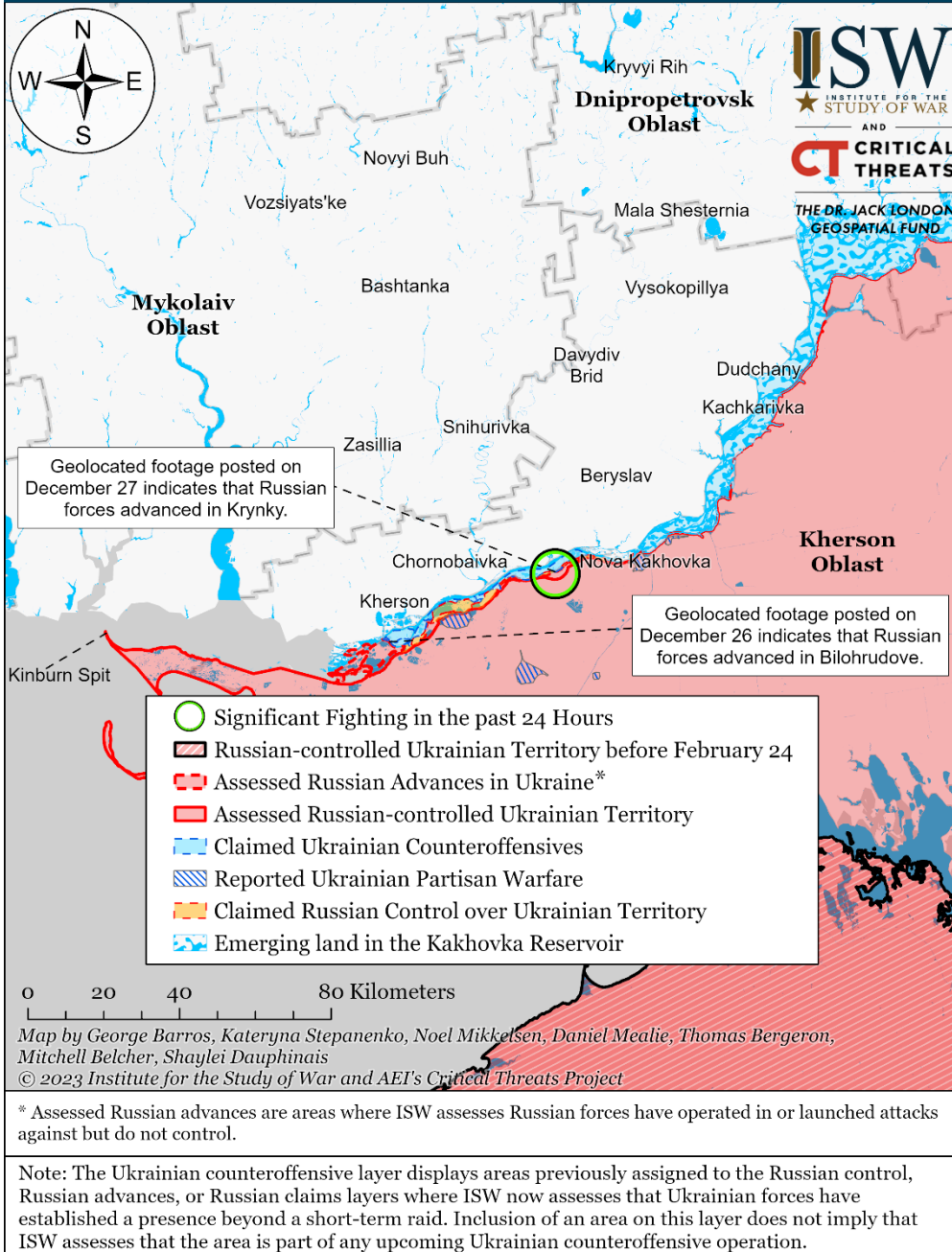
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of December 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast as of December 28, but neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces made confirmed gains in this area. Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that positional fighting continued on the east bank, including in Krynky.[80] Elements of the Russian “Margelov” volunteer battalion are reportedly operating near Krynky.[81]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 28, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

The Russian MoD announced on December 28 that Russia has over 640,000 contract servicemen (*kontrakniki*) - the first-ever official Russian announcement about the number of *kontrakniki* in the Russian Armed Forces since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022.[82] Russian President Vladimir Putin recently announced that over 480,000 individuals signed military contracts with the Russian MoD in 2023, and Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev similarly stated on December 28 that 500,000 *kontrakniki* have joined the ranks of the Russian Armed Forces since January 1, 2023.[83] The Russian MoD also claimed that over 40,000 people fought as members of BARS (Russian Combat Army Reserve) units since the start of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and that over 7,000 personnel operating within BARS units are currently on the battlefield.[84] The Russian MoD also noted that BARS includes Cossack units and that BARS has had the highest number of recruits from Krasnodar Krai and Rostov Oblast, totaling 6,500 recruits. Russian officials may be counting all military personnel such as mobilized troops, actual *kontrakniki*, and volunteers (*dobrovoltsy*) as part of the presented 640,000 *kontrakniki* number in an effort to exaggerate the proportion of Russia's mixed forces that seem to be professionals. The Kremlin significantly lowered qualifications for *kontrakniki* in early 2023, prioritizing generating a high number of recruits over recruiting a smaller cadre of more experienced men to preserve the *kontrakniki* service class as the backbone of Russia's professional military force.[85]

Russian opposition outlet *SOTA* reported that the Russian MoD may be planning to increase Russia's expeditionary force in Ukraine by redeploying active military personnel in Russia to Ukraine.[86] *SOTA* observed that Russian officials prepared amendments for the law "On determining the procedure and conditions for sending military personnel of the Russian Armed Forces." The amendments, if passed, will allow the Russian command to deploy previously uncommitted military personnel to assist the military command, formations, and military units directly involved "in the performance of tasks relating to resolving crisis situations and localizing armed conflicts in peacetime" for a period of more than 30 days but no more than one year. *SOTA* observed that previously the law did not provide grounds for the deployment of military personnel to localized armed conflicts in peacetime.

The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported that the Russian leadership is trying to train more junior lieutenants in a compressed timeframe to offset high personnel losses among junior officers.[87] The GUR noted that Russian servicemen who pass accelerated training and are promoted to the lowest officer ranks immediately deploy to the frontlines. ISW previously observed that Russian Airborne (VDV) Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky alluded to a similar phenomenon in which VDV command schools deployed recent graduates to the frontlines in Ukraine skipping periods of either advanced training or service with units not in combat.[88]

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

Russian sources circulated close-up images of the Iranian Shahed-238 on December 28.[89] The Shahed-238 is a jet-powered version of the Shahed-131/136 variant that Russian forces widely use in Ukraine, and of which Iranian sources initially presented images in November 2023.[90] ISW has not yet confirmed the use of the Shahed-238 in Ukraine, despite previous speculation that Russian forces used these drones during an attack on Kyiv City on November 25.[91]

The Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) will reportedly equip all of its Su-57 fifth generation fighter jets with new second stage engines in 2024.[92] Kremlin newswire *TASS* reported on December 28, citing high-ranking sources close to the VKS, that all Su-57s entering service with the VKS in 2024 will receive second stage (fifth generation) engines.[93] *TASS* also reported that the VKS received more than 10 Su-57s with first stage engines in 2023, and these aircraft have reportedly been involved in aviation missions in Ukraine over the course of the year.[94]

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)

Russian occupation officials continue to deport Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of medical necessity, despite an apparently growing number of cases of highly infectious diseases being transmitted among Ukrainian children *en route* to Russia. Kremlin-appointed Russian Commissioner on Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova stated on December 28 that 50 children from occupied Kherson Oblast went on "vacation" to a seaside sanatorium-resort in Krasnodar Krai for medical and psychological rehabilitation.[95] Lvova-Belova thanked Russian Railways for transporting the children and noted that over 150 Ukrainian children underwent treatment and rehabilitation at sanatorium resorts in Russia as part of the "A Country for Children" program in 2023. Kherson Oblast occupation health minister Artysh Sat notably admitted on December 28 that eight children from occupied Kherson Oblast, who were traveling by train from Moscow to Dzhankoi, occupied Crimea likely as part of a similar Russian-controlled vacation-scheme, were hospitalized in Tambov Oblast with symptoms of acute respiratory viral infection (AFVI) and high fever.[96] ISW previously reported that one 12-year-old girl from occupied Luhansk Oblast died while traveling on a Russian Railways train from a children's camp in Tyumen Oblast on December 21.[97] Recent cases of infectious illnesses amongst Ukrainian children who were under Russian guardianship at the time of their deportation to Russia further suggest that Russia is violating its obligations under international law to ensure the health and safety of "protected persons" who are part of a removed or deported population.[98]

Russia continues efforts to integrate the education system in occupied Ukraine into the Russian system. Russian President Vladimir Putin held a State Council meeting on December 27 on the topic of "increasing the role and prestige of the teacher and mentor," during which Russian authorities discussed the implementation of Russian teaching standards and educational curricula in occupied areas of Ukraine.[99] Sevastopol occupation governor Mikhail Razvozhaev told Putin about the development of educational programs and Russian-approved textbooks in schools in occupied Crimea and particularly highlighted the "nationalization of history education," suggesting that Russian occupation officials are focusing on instituting Russian history curricula that aim to erase Ukrainian historical identity and instill the pro-Kremlin pseudo-historical version of history in schools.[100] Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) occupation head Leonid Pasechnik stated that he talked with Putin about various measures his administration is undertaking to switch schools in occupied Luhansk Oblast to "Russian operating standards." [101] Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) Head Denis Pushilin thanked Putin for various Russian projects to reconstruct schools in occupied Donetsk Oblast.[102] Russian integration efforts targeting schools in occupied areas of Ukraine help the Kremlin further its ideological goals in Ukraine by propagating false Kremlin narratives on

Ukrainian history and identity and will likely have multi-generational impacts as young Ukrainian children are forced to grow up within the bounds of the Russian education system.

An investigation by the *Associated Press (AP)* exposed systemic failures within the Russian Kherson Oblast occupation administration to properly account for deaths following the Kakhovka Hydroelectric Power Plant (KHPP) dam explosion in June of 2023.[103] *AP* published a story on December 28 detailing how Russian occupation authorities “vastly and deliberately undercounted the dead” after flooding in Kherson Oblast resulting from the Russian destruction of the KHPP dam on June 6.[104] *AP* found that Russian occupation authorities controlled the issuance of death certificates, immediately removed the bodies of the dead who were unclaimed by family members, and threatened health workers, all in order to obfuscate the actual scale of deaths in the flood. *AP* concluded that the total number of deaths is likely much higher than official numbers released by Russian occupation officials, which suggests that Russian authorities were engaged in a wider campaign to obscure the cost of the dam explosion.

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Kremlin officials continued to amplify a narrative aimed at discouraging further military aid provisions to Ukraine by claiming that the US and the West are killing more Ukrainians by sending them additional military aid. Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov claimed on December 28 that the latest US military aid package to Ukraine is a “bloody New Year’s gift” and claimed that the US remains loyal to “fighting to the last Ukrainian” because Washington fears Russian military successes such as the capture of Marinka—a town with a prewar population of roughly 9,000 that Russian forces had been trying to capture since 2014.[105]

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov attempted to frame Armenia’s recent efforts to distance itself from Russia as Armenia falling victim to Western promises in an effort to deflect from Russia’s failure to defend Armenia’s interests during the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in September 2023.[106] Lavrov claimed that Yerevan is “succumbing to the persuasion of Westerners” and is trying to reform its foreign policy line by exchanging its alliance with Moscow for “vague promises” from the West. Lavrov claimed that Armenia is trying to justify this strategic turn by blaming Russia for “all the troubles of the republic, including the loss of Karabakh.” Lavrov added that he is confident that such difficulties in the Russian-Armenian relations are temporary and can be resolved with “political will.” Lavrov noted that Armenia is facing several challenges that the United States or the European Union cannot help with, and that Russia seeks to bring peace and stability to Armenia and the South Caucasus. Lavrov’s discussion of strains in Russian-Armenian relations follows recent Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s meetings in St. Petersburg on December 25 and December 26.[107]

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)

Nothing significant to report.

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and

other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

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