



Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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January 9, 2024, 7:35pm 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 12:10pm ET on January 9. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 10 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

A Ukrainian public opinion survey on Ukrainian attitudes towards the Ukrainian government and military indicates that Ukrainian society overwhelmingly supports Ukraine's military and its leadership while experiencing tensions typical in a society fighting an existential defensive war. The Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KMIS) published a survey on December 18, 2023, that it conducted between November 29 and December 9, 2023, that shows that 96 percent of respondents support the Ukrainian Armed Forces, 88 percent trust Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi, and 66 percent trust Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.¹ 84 percent of respondents in a previous KMIS poll conducted in December 2022 expressed trust in Zelensky, and trust in many Ukrainian institutions experienced a similar decline between December 2022 and 2023 – an unsurprising development given the protracted war.² The Ukrainian Armed Forces, the Ukrainian Security Service (SBU), the Ukrainian National Police, and Ukrainian volunteers did not see similar decreases in polled public trust during this time.³

Ukrainian sentiments in December 2022 were likely more optimistic than in November and December 2023 because Ukrainian forces had recently liberated large portions of occupied territory in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts during successful counteroffensive operations in the fall of 2022. Ukraine's successful counteroffensive operations in 2022 liberated the strategic regional capital city of Kherson, pushed the frontline away from several major Ukrainian population centers and turned these cities into near rear and rear areas, which may have allowed more Ukrainians to focus on domestic issues of local governance throughout 2023 instead of the imminent existential threat of Russian military activity and occupation they faced in 2022.

The KMIS poll also shows that the majority of respondents support both Zelensky and Zaluzhnyi and that only 15 percent held polarized opinions supporting one and not the other.⁴ Russian sources have widely promoted Kremlin information operations alleging a serious rift between Ukrainian military and civilian leadership and have routinely attempted to portray domestic issues in Ukraine as significantly undermining the Ukrainian will to fight.⁵ These Russian information operations aim to break Ukrainians' trust in their leadership and weaken Ukrainian morale while also decreasing Western support for Ukraine by falsely portraying Ukrainian society as demoralized and divided. The KMIS poll suggests that these Russian information operations are far from reality and that the Russian offensive campaign in Ukraine remains highly unlikely to break Ukrainian support for Ukraine's military and civilian leadership and the Ukrainian will to fight.

A new independent poll from the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center (NORC) found that Russian President Vladimir Putin maintains strong domestic support for his regime and his war in Ukraine, despite relatively poor economic conditions and living standards in Russia.⁶ The NORC poll surveyed 1,046 Russian adults living in the Russian Federation and Russian-occupied Crimea using data from Russian mobile service providers.⁷ The poll found that 67 percent of participants approve of how Putin has conducted foreign policy and 58 percent approve of his domestic policy, but that 66 percent plan to vote for Putin in the upcoming March 2024 Presidential Election.⁸ Putin's relatively high ratings appear to persevere even though the NORC poll found that Russians are unhappy with rising prices causing a general decline in living conditions.⁹ The NORC poll also noted that 63 percent of participants support the war in Ukraine and that 64 percent of respondents see the war as a "civilizational struggle between Russia and the West."¹⁰ This result contrasts with other recent independent Russian polling that showed decreased support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹¹

Russian ultranationalist vitriolic responses to gender integration in the Ukrainian military highlight Russia's ongoing shift towards a cultural-ideological worldview that seeks to restore rigid and traditional gender roles and exposes gaps between Russia and Ukraine's respective abilities to mobilize their societies. Ukrainian Defense Minister Rustem Umerov stated on January 8 that the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense (MoD) purchased 50,000 sets of uniforms specifically for female servicemembers for the first time.¹² Several ultranationalist Russian milbloggers inaccurately took Umerov's statement to mean that Ukraine would be conscripting women, with one saying that the purchase of uniforms for women means "the time has come for everyone to think," and another milblogger claiming that Ukraine is now preparing to "exterminate" 50,000 Ukrainian women.¹³ Ukraine has not been conscripting women, and neither current law nor proposed bills provide for conscripting Ukrainian women.¹⁴ Women have been volunteering to serve in the Ukrainian military, and Umerov's statement instead reflects recent Ukrainian efforts to further increase gender integration in the Ukrainian Armed Forces by developing uniforms and body armor suited to the unique needs of female servicemembers.¹⁵

The negative Russian responses illuminate not only the ongoing Russian information operation designed to undermine Ukrainians' will to fight, but also the archaic and misogynistic views shaping the worldviews of Russia's leadership and the ultranationalist community. They also reflect the Russians' ongoing failure to understand exactly how broadly and deeply Ukrainian society has mobilized to defend against the Russian invasion. The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense reported in October 2023 that nearly 43,000 female servicemembers are serving in the ranks of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, a 21 percent increase in female servicemembers from 2021.¹⁶ The Ukrainian Military Media Center and Ukrainian Deputy Defense Minister Nataliia Kalmykova stated that over 5,000 female servicemembers were actively serving in frontline combat zones as of November 2023.¹⁷

By contrast, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced in March 2023 that 1,100 Russian women were serving in frontline combat positions of the 39,000 Russian women serving in the Russian Armed Forces, mostly in non-combat roles such as combat medics and cooks.¹⁸ Russian opposition media began reporting in 2023 that Russian authorities were increasingly relying on mass forced recruitment of women from penal colonies to fill force generation requirements, suggesting that recruitment of women in Russia takes place on a much more coercive basis than the voluntarism of Ukraine's female servicemembers.¹⁹ Kremlin officials and Kremlin mouthpieces have recently emphasized the importance of instilling and concretizing traditional gender roles and family values as a fundamental part of Russian domestic policy, with Russian officials calling for the institution of large families with a working father and a stay-at-home mother.²⁰ Russian President Vladimir Putin defined 2024 as the "Year of the Family" during his New Year's Eve address and has recently placed great weight on the role of Russian women as performing their expected role of "motherhood."²¹ The increasing Russian social reliance on traditional gender roles, as defined and encouraged by the state, is likely heavily impacting Russian social expectations for women to fight in the military, thereby impacting Russia's ability to mobilize a significant

portion of society, whereas Ukrainian society continues to be galvanized by a popular desire to defend Ukraine strong enough to bring so many Ukrainian women near and onto the battlefield of their own accord.

Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported that Ukraine has a shortage of anti-aircraft guided missiles after several recent large Russian missile and drone strikes against Ukraine.²² Ihnat stated that Ukraine has rationed air defense equipment and ammunition and has used a considerable amount of Ukraine’s existing air defense missile stockpile in defending against the past three large series of Russian strikes.²³ US Administration officials reported on January 8 that they met with leaders from venture capital firms and technology and defense industries to discuss providing Ukraine with US systems and equipment.²⁴ The meetings reportedly focused on providing Ukraine with drones, demining equipment, and means to counter Russian drones.²⁵

Russian sources continue to complain about persistent command and communication problems that degrade Russian combat capability in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast. A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Russian commanders have less frequently ordered units to conduct attritional assaults in the past two months since Airborne Forces (VDV) Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky replaced Colonel General Oleg Makarevich as the commander of the Russian “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces.²⁶ The milblogger claimed that many problems have persisted and worsened in this area, however. Russian forces operating near Krynky are reportedly unable to target Ukrainian aircraft and helicopters because the Russian command does not give them timely permission to shoot targets down.²⁷ Russian commanders also reportedly take several hours to approve artillery strikes and require units to send target coordinates and video or photo confirmation of targets before approving strikes.²⁸ The milblogger also claimed that Russian forces do not have enough electronic warfare (EW) systems to combat the number of Ukrainian drones operating in the area.²⁹ Another milblogger called on Russian forces to stop moving equipment to Krynky and nearby areas because Ukrainian forces destroy up to 90 percent of Russian equipment there.³⁰ Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that elements of the 17th Tank Regiment (70th Motorized Rifle Division, 18th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District), reportedly deployed southeast of Krynky, are literally “burning with desire” to conduct heavily attritional attacks, suggesting that the command of this regiment is still relying on attritional frontal assaults as a favored attack tactic.³¹ Russian forces, especially elements of the 104th Airborne (VDV) Division, have reportedly suffered significant losses in operations near Krynky.³² ISW has consistently observed Russian complaints of inadequate command, inter- and intra-unit coordination, air defense, fire support, and EW since November 2023 but continues to assess that these reported tactical problems do not always translate into significant operational effects.³³

Russian sources are reviving longstanding calls for a large-scale Russian offensive operation in Kharkiv Oblast to create a “buffer zone” with Belgorod Oblast despite the Russian military’s likely inability to conduct an operation to seize significant territory in Kharkiv Oblast in the near term. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitri Peskov stated on January 9 that Russian forces will do everything to prevent Ukrainian indirect fire in Belgorod Oblast.³⁴ Russian sources seized on Peskov’s comments to call on Russian forces to create a “buffer zone” up to 15 kilometers in depth in Kharkiv Oblast to push Ukrainian MLRS and artillery away from the international border with Belgorod Oblast.³⁵ Russian ultranationalists routinely called for a similar operation in summer 2023 amid widespread discontent about limited cross-border raids by pro-Ukrainian forces into Belgorod Oblast.³⁶ A Russian incursion 15 kilometers in depth and several hundred kilometers in width would be a massive operational undertaking that would require a grouping of forces far larger and significantly better resourced than what Russian forces currently have concentrated along the entire international border with Ukraine, least of all in Belgorod Oblast.³⁷ ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces may intensify efforts to capture Kupyansk, Kharkiv Oblast, in the coming weeks and that the Russian grouping in the Kupyansk direction appears more well-suited to conduct an intensified offensive effort than elsewhere in Ukraine or along the international border.³⁸ The Russian military is likely currently able to conduct only tactical-level actions into Kharkiv Oblast from Belgorod Oblast, which at most would serve as feints to draw and fix Ukrainian forces away from a possible Russian operational effort in the Kupyansk direction.

Recent Kremlin and Russian media rhetoric aimed at threatening Moldova likely continues to embolden pro-Russian separatist leaders in Moldova to attempt to sow political instability and division in Moldova.

Vadim Krasnoselsky, the president of the Russian-backed breakaway republic of Transnistria, claimed in an interview with Kremlin newswire *TASS* published on January 9 that Moldova's increased military budget, joint exercises with NATO, and military subsidies and supplies from European states are evidence of Moldova's "militarization," which threatens Transnistria.³⁹ Krasnoselsky claimed that Transnistria does not threaten Moldova and dismissed the idea that Moldova's force generation efforts stem from a desire to defend itself, despite the fact that Russian troops have occupied Transnistria since 1992 after the Russian Federation intervened on behalf of separatist Transnistria on the pretext of protecting ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations.⁴⁰ Krasnoselsky also affirmed in 2018 his commitment to ensuring that Transnistria eventually becomes part of Russia.⁴¹ Krasnoselsky claimed that Moldova "treacherously attacked [Transnistria's] peaceful cities in the past" and has committed "massive" human rights violations. Krasnoselsky blamed Moldova for stopping dialogue with Transnistria and abandoning previously reached agreements. Krasnoselsky claimed that Moldova is "consistently following the path of escalation" and threateningly stated that Moldova "bears the responsibility for further inevitable consequences." ISW previously assessed that Russia is setting information conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova and justifying any future campaigns by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova--an approach that closely parallels debunked Russian narratives used to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁴²

Krasnoselsky's anger with a recent change to the Moldovan Customs Code likely motivated him to further the Kremlin's efforts to set such information conditions and sow instability in Moldova. CTP has previously assessed that Krasnoselsky is closely related to Moldovan-Russian businessman Viktor Gushan, who effectively controls Transnistria's government and a large part of its economy.⁴³ The Kremlin likely conducted a false flag operation in April 2022 intended to draw Transnistria into its invasion of Ukraine, but ultimately failed to win Gushan's support as Gushan's businesses benefited from ties to the West and Ukraine.⁴⁴ Moldova passed a new Customs Code in March 2023 that went into effect on January 1, 2024, and requires companies in Transnistria to pay import customs duties to Moldova.⁴⁵ Krasnoselsky claimed on January 5 that the change came as a "surprise" to Transnistria.⁴⁶ Moldovan investigative journalists reported in 2020 that two Transnistrian companies tied to Gushan's Sheriff Enterprises imported cigarettes worth about \$22 million to Transnistria without paying taxes.⁴⁷ Krasnoselsky claimed on January 9 to *TASS* that Moldova's introduction of duties starting January 1, 2024, is an "unreasonable" policy that violates the trade agreement between Transnistria and the EU and that Moldova is pushing Moldovan-Transnistrian relations towards "greater confrontation."⁴⁸ Krasnoselsky highlighted that Transnistria is striving to build direct communication with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and emphasized Transnistria's "extensive" bilateral cooperation frameworks with Russia as means to "help avoid risks provoked by" Moldova's policy.⁴⁹

***Bloomberg* reported that officials from Ukraine, the Group of Seven (G7) countries, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other unspecified countries held a meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on December 16 to build a support for Ukrainian conditions to negotiate with Russia.**⁵⁰ Unspecified individuals familiar with the meeting told *Bloomberg* in an article published on January 9 that officials from China, Brazil, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) did not attend the meeting, although Brazil submitted a written statement.

Key Takeaways:

- **A Ukrainian public opinion survey on Ukrainian attitudes towards the Ukrainian government and military indicates that Ukrainian society overwhelmingly supports Ukraine's military and its leadership while experiencing tensions typical in a society fighting an existential defensive war.**
- **A new independent poll from the University of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center (NORC) found that Russian President Vladimir Putin maintains strong**

domestic support for his regime and his war in Ukraine, despite relatively poor economic conditions and living standards in Russia.

- **Russian ultranationalist vitriolic responses to gender integration in the Ukrainian military highlight Russia's ongoing shift towards a cultural-ideological worldview that seeks to restore rigid and traditional gender roles and exposes gaps between Russia and Ukraine's respective abilities to mobilize their own societies.**
- **Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported that Ukraine has a shortage of anti-aircraft guided missiles after several recent large Russian missile and drone strikes against Ukraine.**
- **Russian sources continue to complain about persistent command and communication problems that degrade Russian combat capability in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian sources are reviving longstanding calls for a large-scale Russian offensive operation in Kharkiv Oblast to create a “buffer zone” with Belgorod Oblast despite the Russian military’s likely inability to conduct an operation to seize significant territory in Kharkiv Oblast in the near term.**
- **Recent Kremlin and Russian media rhetoric aimed at threatening Moldova likely continues to embolden pro-Russian separatist leaders in Moldova to attempt to sow political instability and division in Moldova.**
- ***Bloomberg* reported that officials from Ukraine, the Group of Seven (G7) countries, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other unspecified countries held a meeting in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on December 16 to build a support for Ukrainian conditions to negotiate with Russia.**
- **Russian forces made confirmed advances southwest of Donetsk City, and positional engagements continued along the entire frontline.**
- **The Russian military is reportedly abusing Serbian nationals whom Russian officials have recruited to serve in Russian formations in Ukraine.**
- **Russian occupation officials continue the systematic oppression of residents of occupied Crimea using law enforcement and administrative means.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of January 9, 2024, 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.

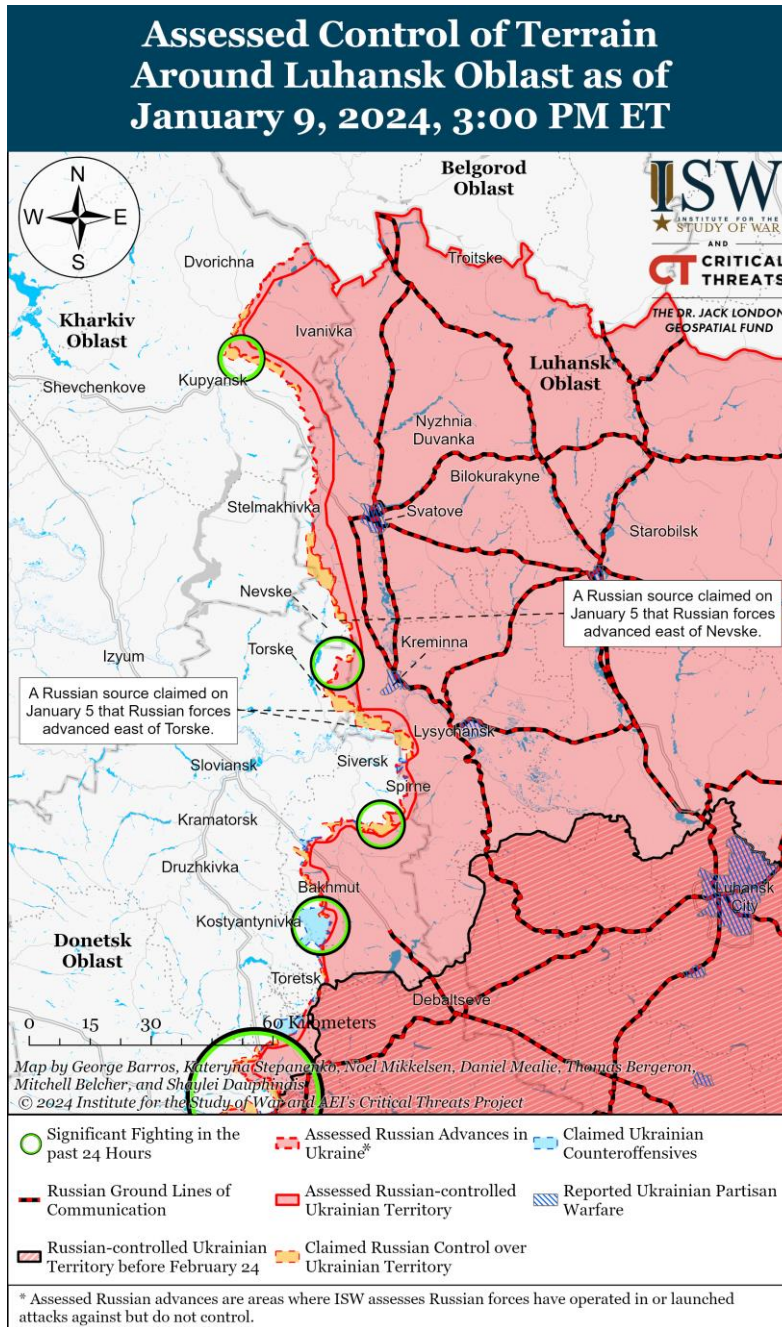
We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military 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

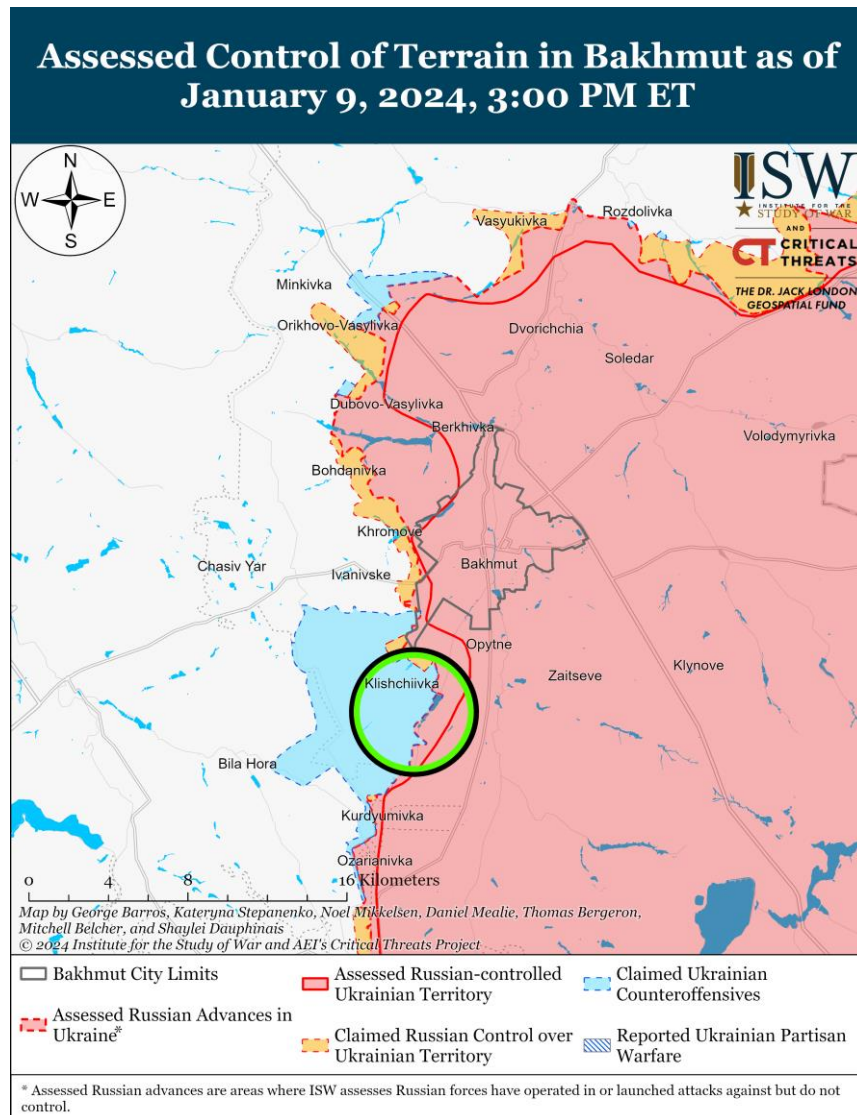
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on January 9, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area. Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that positional engagements continued northeast of Kupyansk near Synkivka and Lake Lyman and west of Kreminna near the Serebyranske forest area and east of Terny.⁵¹

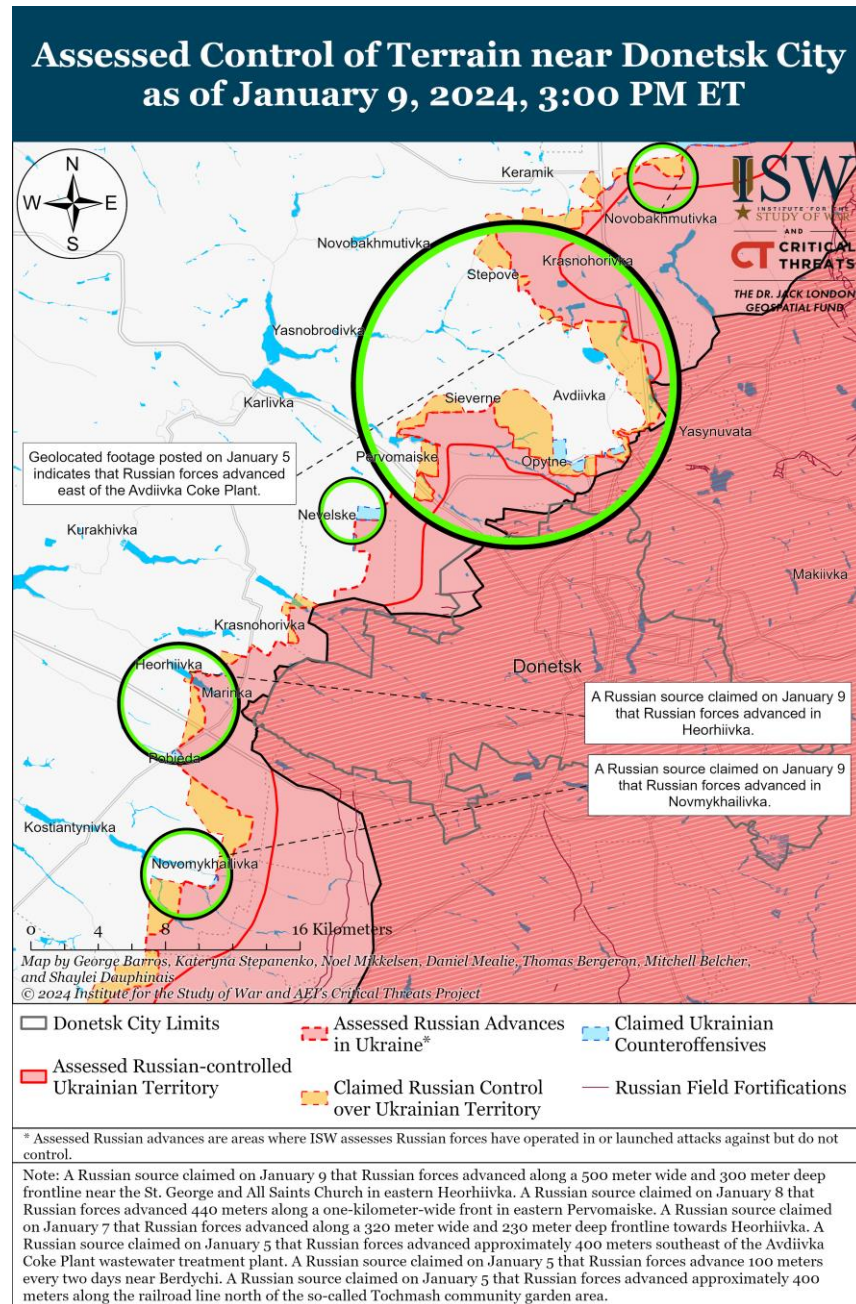


Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional fighting near Bakhmut on January 9. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces retreated to the northern outskirts of Bohdanivka (northwest of Bakhmut), although ISW has not observed any evidence of this claim.⁵² Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional fighting continued northeast of Bakhmut near Spirne, northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka, west of Bakhmut near Khromove and towards Ivanivske, and southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.⁵³ The press officer of a Ukrainian brigade operating in the Bakhmut direction stated that Russian forces are trying to capture Ivanivske before the Russian presidential election in March 2024, likely to cast its capture as a significant victory for political purposes.⁵⁴ Russian sources characterized the localized Russian offensive around Bakhmut as a “creeping” offensive towards Chasiv Yar (west of Bakhmut), acknowledging that potential Russian gains in the area will likely continue to be gradual and that a rapid advance up to Chasiv Yar is unlikely.⁵⁵ Elements of the Russian 98th Airborne (VDV) Division and the 11th VDV Brigade are reportedly operating in the Bakhmut direction.⁵⁶

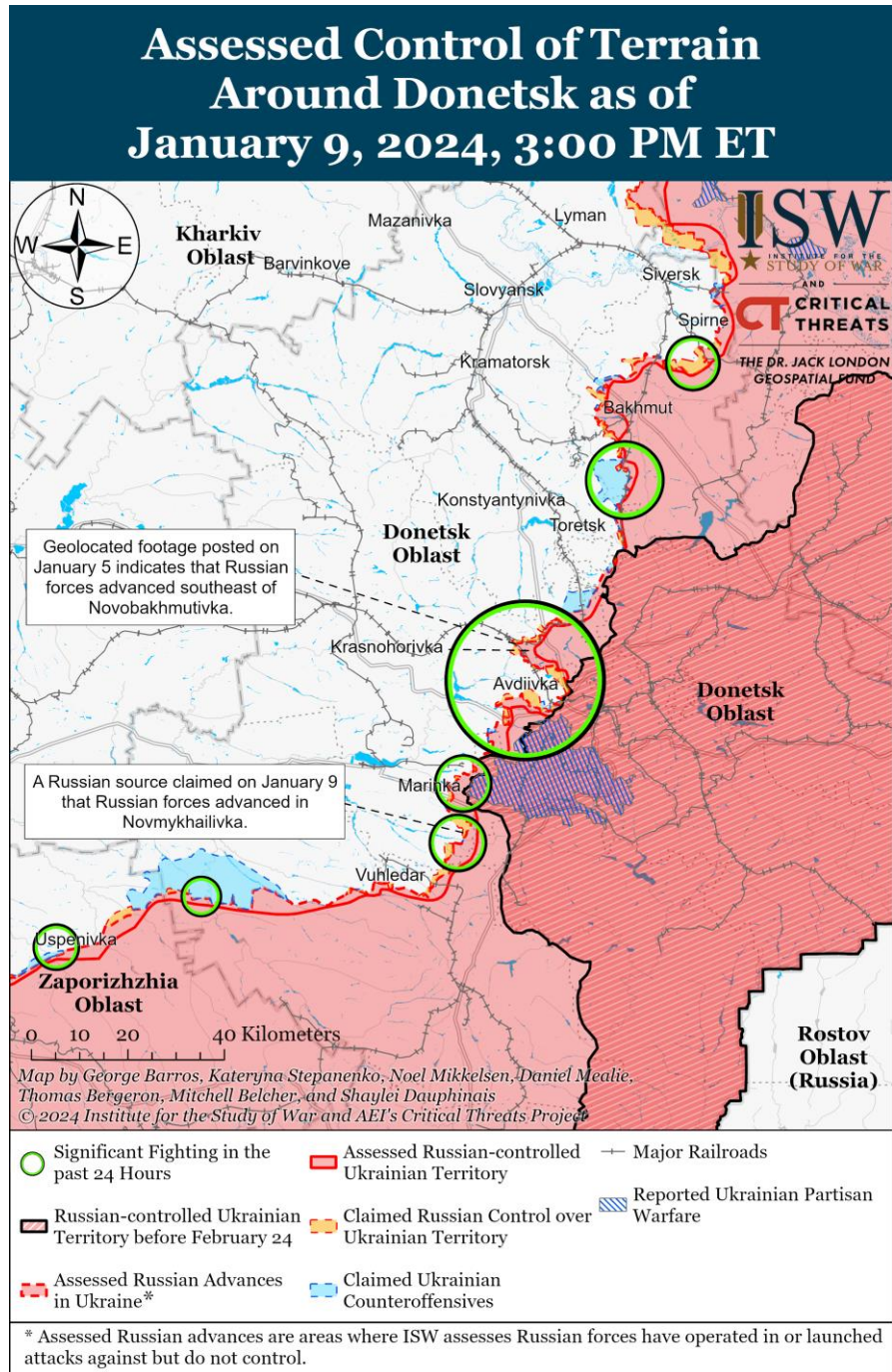


Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements near Avdiivka on January 9. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional fighting continued northwest of Avdiivka near Ocheretyne, Novobakhmutivka, and Stepove; in northwestern Avdiivka near the Avdiivka Coke Plant; west of Avdiivka near Sieverne and Tonenke; and southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske and Nevelske.⁵⁷



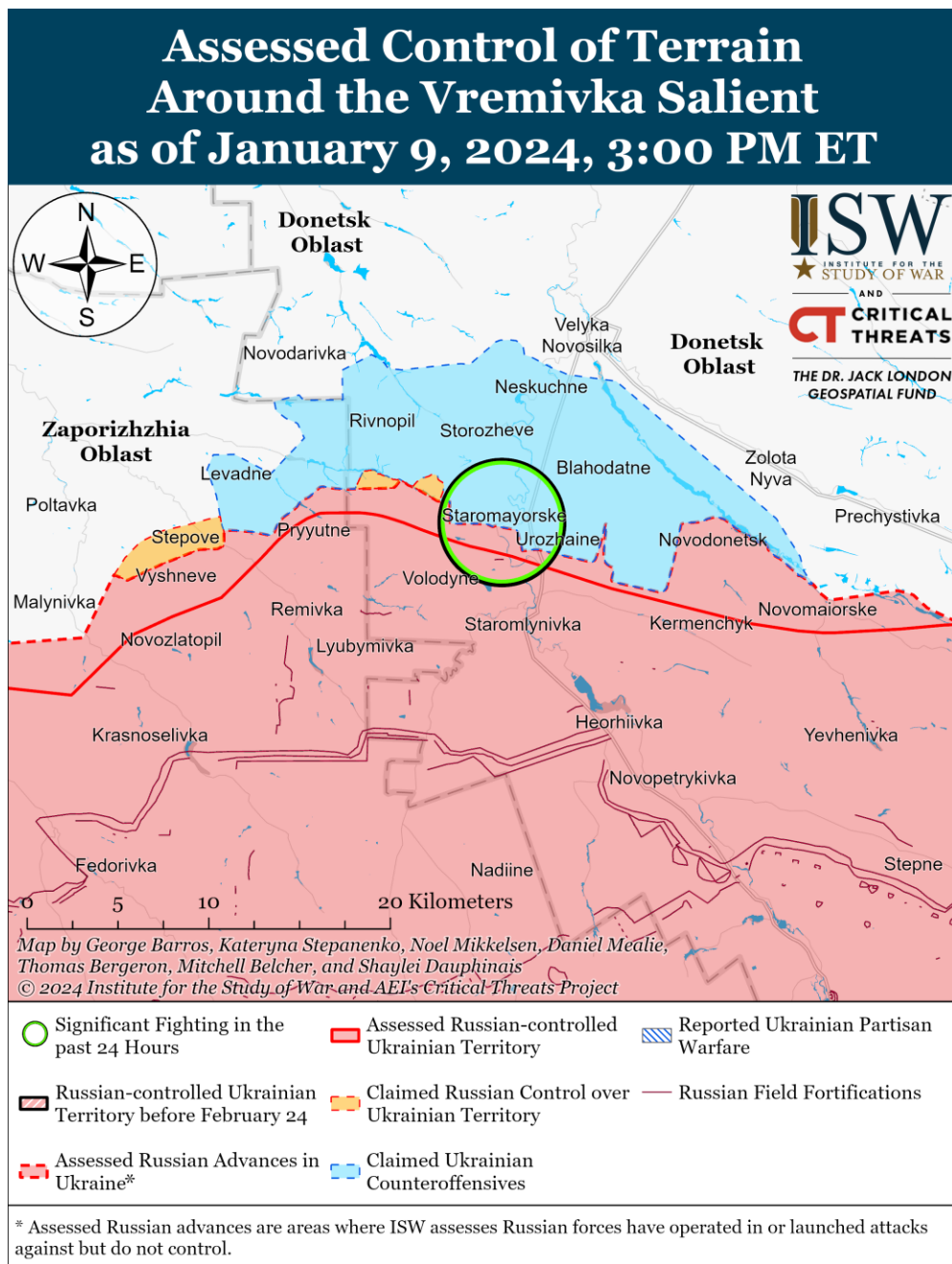
Russian forces recently advanced southwest of Donetsk City, and both Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly made additional gains west and southwest of Donetsk City on January 9. Geolocated footage published on January 9 indicates that Russian forces advanced in southern Novomykhailivka (southwest of Donetsk City) on December 26.⁵⁸ Russian milbloggers claimed on January 9 that Russian forces made marginal gains on the southeastern outskirts of Novomykhailivka and that Ukrainian forces counterattacked south of Novomykhailivka and pushed Russian forces out of unspecified positions in the area.⁵⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian

forces captured the St. George and All Saints Church in Heorhiivka (west of Donetsk City) and advanced 500 meters in width and 300 meters in depth in the area.⁶⁰ Several Russian sources claimed that Russian forces advanced near Heorhiivka with select sources claiming that Russian forces reached the eastern outskirts of the settlement.⁶¹ ISW has not observed visual confirmation of any of the claimed Russian advances near Heorhiivka or reported Ukrainian advances near Novomykahilivka. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled at least 14 Russian assaults near Heorhiivka, Novomykhailivka, and Pobieda (southwest of Donetsk City).⁶²



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

Positional engagements continued in the Donetsk-Zaporizhzhia Oblast border area on January 9, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that fighting continued near Staromayorske (south of Velyka Novosilka) and Pryyutne and Chervone (both southwest of Velyka Novosilka).⁶³ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces maintain the tactical initiative south of Velyka Novosilka, and that Ukrainian forces have almost entirely ceased offensive activity in this area.⁶⁴ Elements of the Russian 34th Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Southern Military District [SMD]) and 394th Motorized Rifle Regiment (127th Motorized Rifle Division, 5th CAA, Eastern Military District [EMD]) are reportedly operating in this area.⁶⁵



Positional engagements continued in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on January 9, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces successfully counterattacked north of Novoprokopivka (just south of Robotyne) and regained some previously lost positions, bringing the frontline slightly closer to Novoprokopivka itself.⁶⁶ ISW has not yet observed visual confirmation of these Ukrainian advances, however. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that positional fighting continued near Robotyne, Novoprokopivka, and Verbove (east of Robotyne).⁶⁷ Several Russian milbloggers noted that weather conditions are deteriorating in this area, and that cold weather and wet snow are complicating tactical engagements.⁶⁸ Elements of the Russian 42nd Motorized Rifle Division (58th CAA, SMD), 247th Guards Air Assault (VDV) Regiment (7th VDV Division), and "Osman" 100th Reconnaissance Brigade (58th CAA, SMD) are reportedly operating in this area.⁶⁹



Geolocated footage posted on January 9 confirms that Russian forces hold positions along the Konka River northwest of Oleshky on the east bank of the Dnipro River.⁷⁰ Russian and Ukrainian sources also reported that positional engagements continued in and around Krynky, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline on the east bank.⁷¹



Russian forces reportedly continue to draw military assets to occupied Crimea. Ukrainian state body Representation of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea noted on January 8 that Ukrainian partisans have located several military objects near Zaozerne in the Yevpatoria district in western Crimea, as well as an influx of artillery and cluster munitions at the railway station near Biyuk-Onlar in central Crimea, which is reportedly being directed to Russian forces in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts.⁷² Ukrainian partisans also reported that Russian forces transferred the lead Ivan Gren-class large amphibious landing ship from Novorossiysk to Sevastopol.⁷³

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

The Russian military is reportedly abusing Serbian nationals whom Russian officials have recruited to serve in Russian formations in Ukraine. A Serbian volunteer reportedly serving in the separate “Wolf” unit of the Russian 119th Airborne (VDV) Regiment (106th VDV Division) claimed that Russian commanders order Serbian fighters to conduct assaults under threat of violence and withhold provisions and ammunition from them.⁷⁴ ISW previously observed reports that the Russian military had recruited up to several hundred Serbian nationals to the separate “Wolf” unit and that Cuban and Nepali nationals are serving in VDV formations, including the 106th VDV Division.⁷⁵ Elements of the 106th VDV Division have been operating near Bakhmut since at least April 2023 and have likely suffered heavy personnel losses.⁷⁶ The Russian military may have assigned foreign volunteers to the 106th VDV Division to offset these losses.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled Africa Corps claimed on January 8 that its personnel deployed to unspecified areas of Africa as it continues recruitment in Russia.⁷⁷ The Africa Corps previously suggested that it would operate in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.⁷⁸

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

The Russian military reportedly started recently using new Shahed-238 drones (Russian name: Geran-3) to conduct strikes against Ukraine. Ukrainian sources stated on January 8 that Ukrainian forces recently shot down a jet-powered Shahed-238 drone traveling at about 500 kilometers per hour.⁷⁹ Several Russian sources claimed that Shahed-238s can fly at that speed and have warheads weighing up to 300 kilograms, in comparison to Shahed-136s (Russian name: Geran-2), which can fly at speeds up to 200 kilometers per hour and have warheads weighing up to 50 kilograms.⁸⁰ A Russian milblogger claimed that the Shahed-238 can vertically dive from a height of about 10 kilometers.⁸¹ Another milblogger claimed that Shahed-238s are more expensive to produce and have a slightly shorter range than older Shahed models.⁸²

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 the systematic oppression of residents of occupied Crimea using law enforcement and administrative means. Ukrainian state body Representation of the President of Ukraine in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea stated that as of January 8, the Russian occupation administration in Crimea has illegally imprisoned 204 people, including 123 Crimean Tatars, and are considering 625 cases against Crimean residents for violations of the Russian Code of Administrative Offenses.⁸³ Russian occupation authorities are likely in part using small-scale administrative sentences that result in fines to collect personal data on residents of Crimea, which can be used against them in the future.

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

A Russian milblogger reiterated that Russia’s expansionist maximalist goals in Ukraine extend beyond the previously announced annexation of four Ukrainian Oblasts (Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia oblasts – territories that Russian forces do not wholly control). The milblogger claimed on January 9 that Russia needs to capture Kharkiv, Sumy, and Chernihiv oblasts in order to better protect Russia’s border areas from Ukrainian artillery and rocket strikes and to fully implement the tasks of Russia’s “special military operation.”⁸⁴

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reiterated boilerplate Kremlin narratives on January 9 about Ukrainian personnel and equipment losses, Ukraine’s lack of agency as a pawn of the West, and the combat readiness of Russia’s nuclear triad. ISW previously assessed that the Kremlin falsely frames Ukraine as a pawn of the West to mask Russia’s expansionist and maximalist goals of establishing full effective Russian control of Ukraine and uses nuclear rhetoric to prompt the West to pressure Ukraine to negotiate.⁸⁵

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)

Wagner Group personnel reportedly continued to train Belarusian forces in Belarus as of December 2023. Independent Belarusian monitoring group the *Hajun Project* reported on January 1 that an unspecified number of Wagner personnel trained personnel of the “Tornado,” “Storm,” and “Taifun” special purpose detachments (all of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs [MVD]) and personnel of the Belarusian 51st Artillery Brigade.⁸⁶ Wagner personnel also reportedly train cadets in one-month and three-week courses at the Internal Troops Faculty of the Belarusian Military Academy.⁸⁷ The *Hajun Project* reported that satellite imagery shows that the number of military vehicles at the Wagner camp in Tsel, Asipovichy, Mogilev Oblast decreased by 30 percent in November and December 2023 and assessed that Wagner forces could have taken the equipment back to Russia or transferred it to the regular Russian military.⁸⁸

A Belarusian source reported that Russia delivered about five million rounds of ammunition to Belarus in December 2023. The Belarusian Community of Railway Workers stated on January 8 that a train carrying the ammunition left Barnaul, Altai Republic on December 10 and reached its destination in Golynets, Mogilev Oblast on December 22.⁸⁹

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.

¹ <https://kiis dot com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1335&page=1>

² <https://kiis dot com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1335&page=1>

³ <https://kiis dot com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1335&page=1>

⁴ <https://kiis dot com.ua/?lang=ukr&cat=reports&id=1335&page=1>

⁵ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar122323> ; <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-16-2023%C2%AO;%C2%AOhttps://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-11-2023%C2%AO;%C2%AOhttps://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-10-2023%C2%AO;%C2%AOhttps://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-3-2023>

⁶ <https://www.norc.org/research/library/new-survey-finds-most-russians-see-ukrainian-war-as-defense-against-west.html>; <https://www.norc.org/research/projects/russian-public-opinion-wartime.html>

⁷ <https://www.norc.org/research/library/new-survey-finds-most-russians-see-ukrainian-war-as-defense-against-west.html>

⁸ <https://www.norc.org/research/library/new-survey-finds-most-russians-see-ukrainian-war-as-defense-against-west.html>; <https://www.norc.org/research/projects/russian-public-opinion-wartime.html>

⁹ <https://www.norc.org/research/projects/russian-public-opinion-wartime.html>

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