

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 17
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December 17, 5:30 pm 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.

The Kremlin is likely attempting to depict Russian President Vladimir Putin as a competent wartime leader and to rehabilitate the image of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) by publicizing Putin’s meeting with the joint headquarters of the Russian Armed Forces. The Kremlin announced on December 17 that Putin worked at the joint headquarters of the services of the Russian Armed Forces throughout the day, heard reports on the progress of the “Special Military Operation” in Ukraine, and held a meeting with the joint headquarters and a separate meeting with commanders.¹ The Russian MoD and media published footage of the meeting with the joint headquarters that showed that Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Army General Valery Gerasimov, Russian Defense Minister Army General Sergei Shoigu, and the Commander of the Joint Group of Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergei Surovikin were in attendance.² Images and video of the event provided by the Russian MoD preclude the identification of other notable officers (such as military district or army commanders) present, however. The Kremlin likely publicized the meeting to present Putin as being thoroughly engaged with the planning and execution of the war in Ukraine following recent prominent criticism of his role in leading the war effort by figures in the ultra-nationalist pro-war community.³ One prominent milblogger even questioned whether “Putin finally showed public interest in the special military operation” at their suggestion to do so.⁴

The Kremlin also likely publicized Putin’s meeting with the joint headquarters to rehabilitate the image of the Russian MoD in response to the pro-war community’s routine criticism of the Russian MoD. The Kremlin likely consciously publicized Gerasimov’s, Shoigu’s, and Surovikin’s attendance at the meeting with Putin to present the Russian MoD as an organized, unified, and effective war-fighting institution and to shield the top commanders of the Russian Armed Forces from further criticism. The Russian MoD has taken great care in the past months to affirm Gerasimov’s continued role as Chief of the General Staff for a similar reason- in the absence of tangible Russian victories against Ukraine, Russian military leadership seeks to present a picture of a functional and seamless chain of military command.⁵ The Kremlin is likely attempting to rehabilitate the image of the Russian MoD to counterbalance the growing influence of pro-war ultra-nationalist figures, primarily that of Chechen Republic head Ramzan Kadyrov and Wagner Group Financier Yevgeny Prigozhin, and their parallel military structures. The Kremlin will likely continue to attempt to shield the Russian MoD from criticism while still facilitating the growing influence of these ultra-nationalist pro-war figures. This effort is unsustainable and will likely continue to generate conflict between the Russian MoD and the ultra-nationalist pro-war community.

The Kremlin likely aims to portray Putin as a leader in touch with the Russian people by publicizing Putin’s participation in meaningless events like the grand opening of a turkey farm. Independent Russian news outlet *The Moscow Times* reported that the Kremlin has instructed leaders of certain state-owned corporations and regional governors to prepare a “positive agenda” of news and events in which Putin can participate.⁶ *The Moscow Times* noted that Putin’s calendar already

includes small events, such as the grand opening of a turkey breeding center, commemorating the anniversaries of state corporations, and reopening a repaired highway.⁷ *The Moscow Times* cited Kremlin officials who said that the social well-being of the Russian people is declining while war fatigue is growing and that Putin needs to be seen as a “herald of good news.”⁸ Such efforts likely aim to remind the Russian people that Putin is not just a military leader in wartime but also a civilian leader with close ties to the people. However, amplifying pithy events while canceling opportunities for the public to meaningfully engage with Putin on the state of the war and the country will not likely meaningfully improve Putin’s image, and, as ISW previously assessed, may undermine Putin’s populist appeal.⁹ Russian pro-war nationalists have recently criticized the Russian MoD for similar performative messaging that ignores Russia’s wartime realities by branding the MoD with the epithet “Russian Ministry of Camouflage Selfies,” as ISW has previously reported.¹⁰

A *New York Times* (NYT) investigation of Russian military documents supports ISW’s longstanding assessments about how flawed Russian planning assumptions and campaign design decisions plagued Russia’s invasion of Ukraine from its onset. ISW has long assessed that faulty Russian planning assumptions, campaign design decisions, and Russian violations of Russia’s own military doctrine undermined Russian operations. The NYT acquired and published logbooks, timetables, orders, and other documents of elements of the 76th Airborne Division and 1st Guards Tank Army related to the early days of the war on December 16.¹¹ The documents demonstrate that Russian military planners expected Russian units to be able to capture significant Ukrainian territory with little to no Ukrainian military opposition. The documents indicate that elements of the 76th Airborne Division and Eastern Military District were ordered to depart Belarus and reach Kyiv within 18 hours against little resistance; Russian planners placed OMON riot police and SOBR Russian National Guard (Rosgvardia) special police elements (essentially a Russian SWAT equivalent) within the first column of a maneuver element of the 104th Air Assault Regiment of the 76th Airborne Division.¹² Riot police are not suitable lead elements for a large maneuver force in a conventional force-on-force war because they are not trained to conduct combined arms or mechanized warfare. The decision to place riot police in the lead column is a violation of Russian (or any normal) doctrine and indicates that Russian planners did not expect significant organized Ukrainian resistance. A separate set of orders indicates that Russian planners expected unsupported elements of the Russian 26th Tank Regiment (of the 47th Tank Division, 1st Guards Tank Army) to conduct a mostly uninhibited, 24-hour dash from Ukraine’s border with Russia to a point across the Dnipro River, about 400 kilometers away.¹³ Ukrainian forces destroyed elements of the 26th Tank Regiment in Kharkiv Oblast, hundreds of kilometers short of its intended destination on March 17.¹⁴

The NYT investigation also supports ISW’s assessments that Russian strategic commanders have been micromanaging operational commanders’ decisions on tactical matters and that Russian morale is very low. The investigation supported existing reporting that Russian soldiers in Belarus did not know they were going to attack Ukraine until February 23—the day before the invasion—and that some soldiers did not know about the invasion until one hour before the invasion began.¹⁵ A retired Russian general told the NYT that the lack of a unified Russian theater command meant there was “no unified planning of actions and command [and control].”¹⁶ A Ukrainian pilot told the NYT he was amazed that Russian forces did not conduct a proper air and missile campaign at the beginning of the war to target Ukrainian airfields—as Russian doctrine prescribes. The NYT reported a Russian tank commander deliberately destroyed a Rosgvardia checkpoint in Zaporizhia Oblast over an argument and that many Russian soldiers sabotaged their own vehicles to avoid combat.¹⁷ The NYT’s findings support ISW’s assessments

and body of research on why the Russian military has been experiencing significant failures since the beginning of the invasion.

Ongoing Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut are further driving a wedge between forces of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Wagner Group troops. DNR Head Denis Pushilin claimed on December 17 that both DNR and Wagner units are closing the “pincers” on Ukrainian troops in Bakhmut.¹⁸ Several milbloggers responded to Pushilin’s claim and categorically denied that DNR troops have anything to do with fighting in Bakhmut, emphasizing that offensive efforts in this area are exclusively led by the Wagner Group.¹⁹ The disparities between Pushilin’s claims, which represent the official DNR line, and statements made by Prigozhin and other prominent voices in the Russian information space suggest that there is a continued and growing divide between the DNR and the Wagner Group. During battles for settlements south of Bakhmut in October, Prigozhin denied any involvement by DNR or conventional Russian troops in the capture of Ivanhrad.²⁰ Prigozhin has also previously been remarkably clear-eyed about the slow and grinding pace of Wagner advances in the Bakhmut area, which directly contrasts with exaggerated claims made by Pushilin and other Russian sources.²¹ Wagner’s role in operations around Bakhmut will likely continue to contribute to divides between various factions in the Russian military and discredit DNR authorities and the forces that they command.

The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assesses that the Kremlin is not serious about negotiations with Ukraine, agreeing with a longstanding ISW assessment. CIA Director William Burns told PBS NewsHour on December 16, “Most conflicts end in negotiations, but that requires a seriousness on the part of the Russians in this instance that I don't think we see... it's not our assessment that the Russians are serious at this point about a real negotiation.”²² ISW has consistently assessed that Russian President Vladimir Putin is not interested in negotiating seriously with Ukraine and retains maximalist objectives for the war.²³

Putin has consistently weaponized invocations of the negotiation process to isolate Ukraine from partner support. Putin has routinely framed Ukraine as refusing concessions and likely seeks to use any ceasefire and negotiation window to allow Russian troops time to reconstitute and relaunch operations, thus depriving Ukraine of the initiative. A ceasefire agreement that occurs soon enough to allow Russian forces to rest and refit this winter is extremely unlikely. Russia and Ukraine are currently opposed to one another on the terms of any such agreement, and it is highly unlikely that Russian and Ukrainian officials will agree to a ceasefire, let alone implement one, for some months. Russian forces will likely not have the opportunity to pause Ukrainian winter counter-offensives and reset before spring.

Key Takeaways

- **The Kremlin is likely attempting to increase perceptions of Putin’s competence and of that of the Russian Ministry of Defense by publicizing Putin’s meeting with the joint headquarters of the Russian Armed Forces and Putin’s appearances at non-military events.**
- **A *New York Times* investigation of Russian military documents from early in the war supports ISW’s longstanding assessments about how flawed Russian planning assumptions and campaign design decisions plagued Russia’s invasion of Ukraine from its onset.**

- **Ongoing Russian offensive operations around Bakhmut are further driving a wedge between forces of the Donetsk People’s Republic and Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Wagner Group troops.**
- **The US Central Intelligence Agency assesses that the Kremlin is not serious about negotiations with Ukraine, agreeing with a longstanding ISW assessment.**
- **Ukrainian forces conducted counterattacks near Svatove and Kreminna and continue to strike Russian rear areas.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations near Bakhmut and Avdiivka-Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian officials warned that Russian forces may be attempting to draw Ukrainian forces into a trap on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River.**
- **Russia may be conducting an information operation falsely connecting ongoing negotiations on the demilitarization of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant to a prospective future Ukrainian counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast.**
- **Several Russian sources denounced a military commissar's claim that Russian authorities will extend the service period for conscript soldiers. An extension of the legal mandatory service period would not be necessary to keep current conscripts in the field, however, as all former conscripts are reservists, and all reservists are already eligible for mobilization.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 17, 2022, 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 those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

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

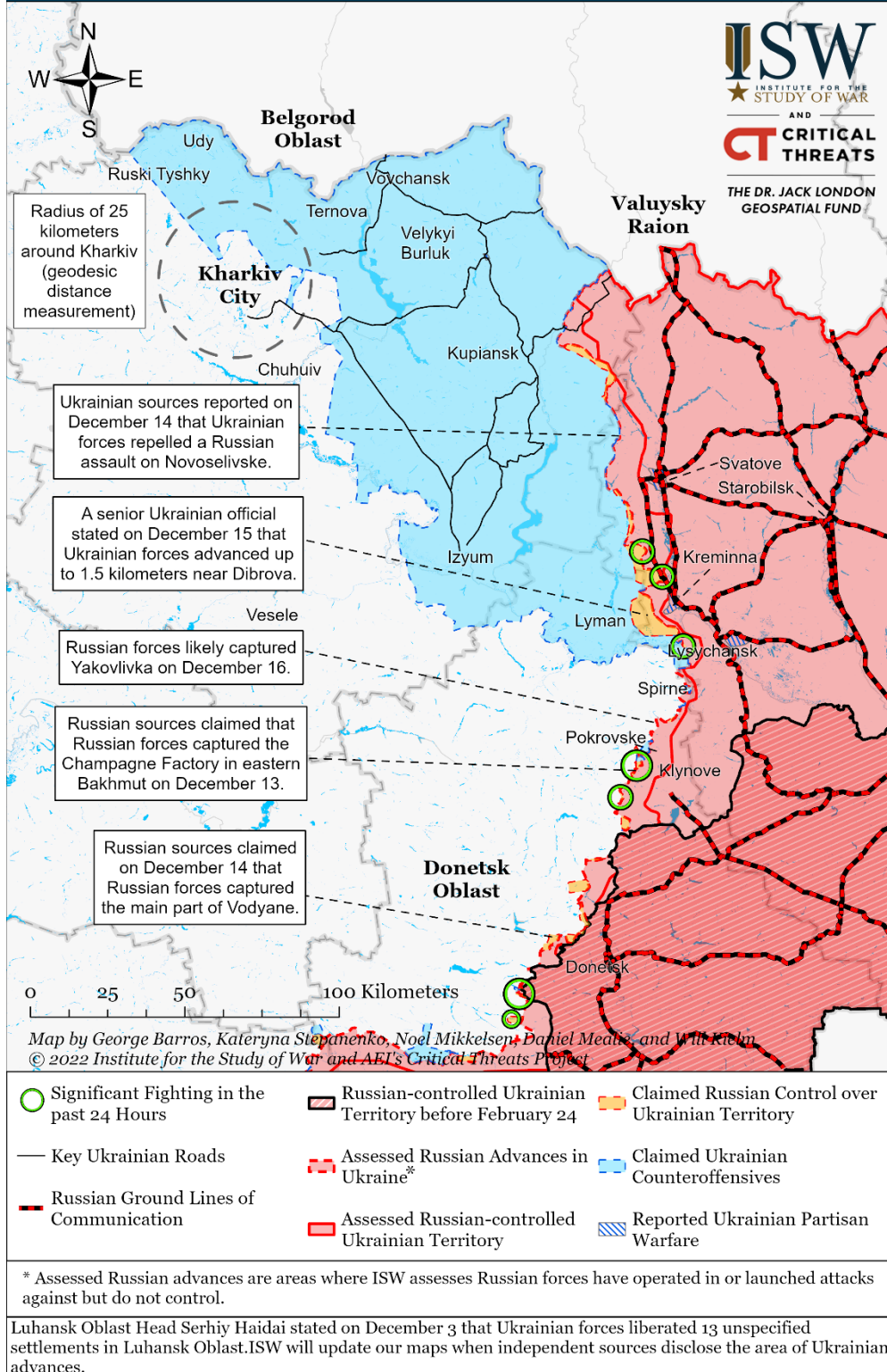
Ukrainian Counteroffensives (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

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

Ukrainian forces reportedly continued counter-offensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line on December 17. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted assaults in the direction of Sofiivka, Luhansk Oblast (21km northwest of Svatove).²⁴ Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Ukrainian forces are advancing near Svatove and that the Svatove area is currently one of the most active sections of the front.²⁵ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted assaults in the direction of Russian positions near Terny, Donetsk Oblast (17km northwest of Kreminna) and Nevske, Luhansk Oblast (18km northwest of Kreminna).²⁶ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces also conducted an assault in the direction of Holykove (10km north of Kreminna) in order to gain control of the R-66 highway (Svatove-Kreminna highway) and push Russian forces across the Krasna River.²⁷ Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Ukrainian forces are also advancing near Kreminna.²⁸ Russian troops conducted limited counterattacks to regain lost positions near Kreminna. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Ploshchanka (17km northwest of Kreminna), Chervonopopivka (6km northwest of Kreminna) and Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna).²⁹

Ukrainian forces reportedly continued to strike Russian rear areas in Luhansk Oblast on December 17. Russian and social media sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck Russian rear areas in Lantrativka (57km northeast of Svatove), Shchastia (78km southeast of Kreminna), and Kadiivka (60km southeast of Kreminna).³⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of December 17, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



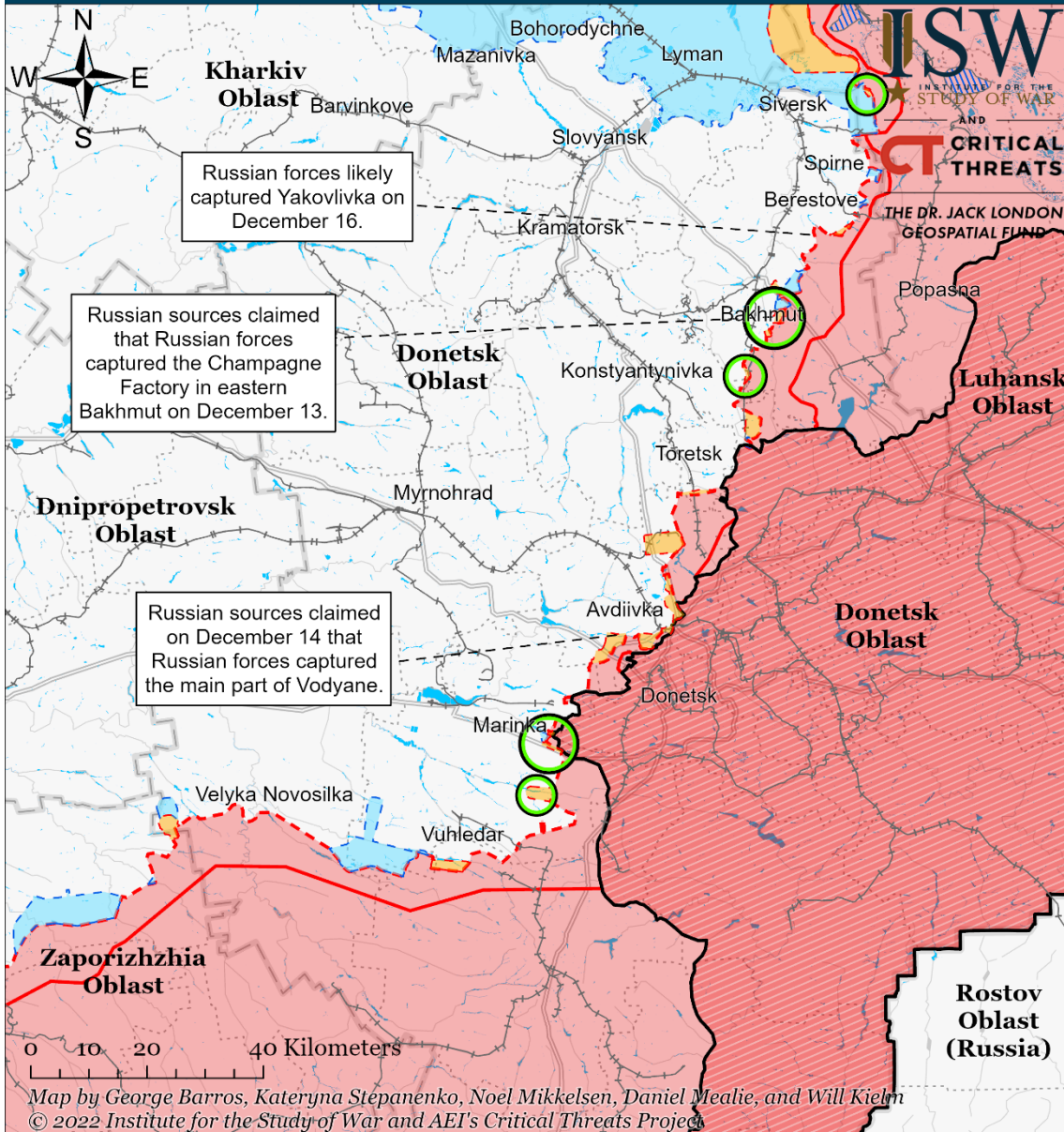
Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on December 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian assaults on Bakhmut itself, northeast of Bakhmut near Zelenopillya (4km northeast of Bakhmut), and south of Bakhmut near Opytne (3km south of Bakhmut) and Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).³¹ Geolocated footage shows Ukrainian troops shelling Russian positions northeast of Bakhmut between Soledar (10km northeast of Bakhmut) and Bakhmutske (9km northeast of Bakhmut), indicating Russian forces have advanced in this area.³² Head of the Chechen Republic Ramzan Kadyrov posted footage reportedly of Chechen “Akhmat” special forces and elements of the Luhansk People’s Republic 2nd Army Corps firing at Ukrainian positions in Soledar.³³ A Ukrainian volunteer serviceman reported that Wagner Group forces in Opytne are being reinforced either by fresh Wagner Group troops or conventional Russian servicemen, potentially marine detachments from the Vuhledar area.³⁴ A Russian milblogger reported that small arms exchanges are ongoing in Opytne and that Ukrainian troops are actively counterattacking south of Bakhmut near Kurdiuvivka and Ozarianivka.³⁵ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian counterattacks northeast and south of Bakhmut.³⁶ Multiple Russian sources circulated footage of Ukrainian trenches in Bakhmut’s city center, suggesting that this indicates Ukrainian troops are preparing for urban combat defense.³⁷

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the western outskirts of Donetsk City on December 17. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops attacked near Marinka, Pobieda, and Novomykhailivka, all near the southwestern outskirts of Donetsk City.³⁸ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces attacked towards Vodiane, Pervomaiske, and Nevelske (all on the northwestern outskirts of Donetsk City) and that fighting is ongoing in the Marinka city center.³⁹ The Russian MoD claimed that Russian troops destroyed two Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups near Novomayorske and Shevchenko, about 50km southwest of Donetsk City.⁴⁰ The Ukrainian National Guard reported that national guardsmen successfully repelled a Russian attack near Velyka Novoselivka, about 70km southwest of Donetsk City and about 15km east of the Zaporizhia-Donetsk Oblast border.⁴¹ Russian forces continued routine artillery fire along the line of contact in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area, in western Donetsk Oblast, and in eastern Zaporizhia Oblast.⁴²

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of December 17, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

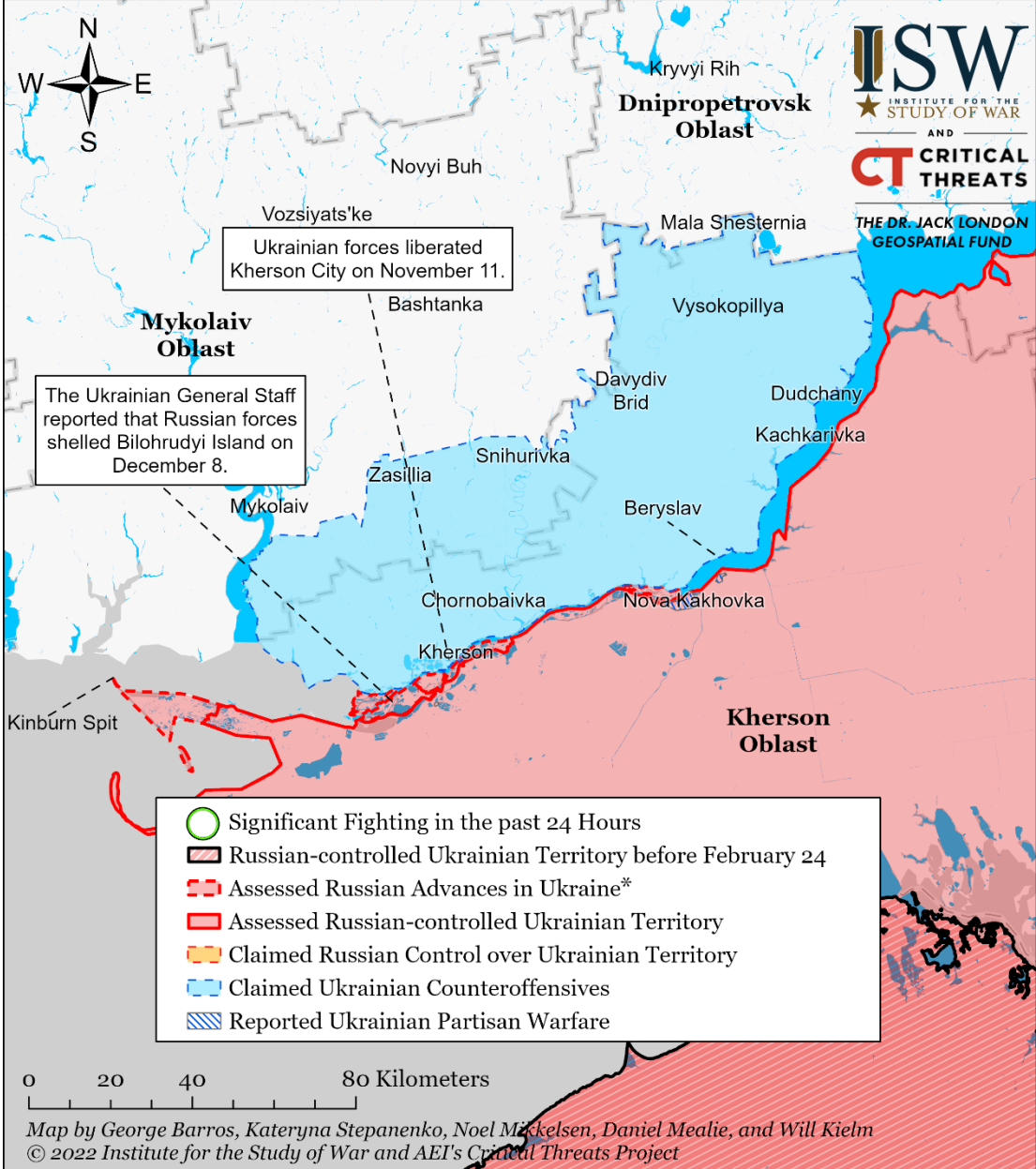
Ukrainian officials warned that Russian forces may be attempting to draw Ukrainian forces into a trap on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that unspecified Russian elements withdrew from Kakhovka and Nova Kakhovka, Kherson Oblast to Nyzhni Sirohozy (at the T2209 and T2208 junction 50km southeast of the east bank of the Dnipro River) and that Russian forces have been telling locals that they will fully withdraw from the Kakhovka area by the new year.⁴³ Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Natalya Humenyuk stated that Ukrainian officials are verifying this information because Russian forces could be attempting to lure Ukrainian forces into a trap on the east bank of the Dnipro River.⁴⁴ It is very unlikely that Russian forces would be able to fake a withdrawal without Ukrainian forces detecting the deception.

Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian rear areas in southern Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian strikes against Russian force concentrations in Tokmak and Polohy, Zaporizhia Oblast wounded over 100 Russian military personnel and destroyed an ammunition depot on December 15.⁴⁵ A Ukrainian source reported explosions in Zalizynyi Port (along the Black Sea coastline in southwestern Kherson Oblast, 40km south of the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River) on December 17.⁴⁶

Russian forces continued artillery, rocket, and missile strikes against areas in southern Ukraine on December 17. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces continued to conduct rocket and artillery strikes against frontline areas in Zaporizhia Oblast west of Hulyaipole.⁴⁷ Ukrainian officials stated that Russian forces shelled Nikopol, Dnipropetrovsk Oblast.⁴⁸ Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces shelled Kherson City and its environs on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River.⁴⁹ Odesa Oblast Military Administration Spokesperson Serhiy Bratchuk stated that Ukrainian air defenses intercepted two Russian Onyx missiles that were heading towards Odesa Oblast on December 17.⁵⁰

Russia may be conducting a new information operation falsely connecting ongoing negotiations regarding the demilitarization of the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) with a prospective future Ukrainian counteroffensive in Zaporizhia Oblast. A Russian milblogger claimed on December 17 that Ukraine seeks to force Russia to demilitarize the ZNPP using diplomatic means in order to reduce Russian forces' ability to defend against a prospective Ukrainian counteroffensive towards Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast.⁵¹ Russian milbloggers have previously misconstrued diplomatic efforts as attempts to handicap Russian forces at the ZNPP and claimed that French President Emmanuel Macron stated that both sides had reached a deal on the removal of heavy and light weapons from the ZNPP, when Macron only specified heavy weapons.⁵² Such an information operation likely intends to undermine the ongoing negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency to establish a security zone around the ZNPP as well as Ukraine's status as the legitimate operator of the ZNPP.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 17, 2022, 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.

Light reconnaissance elements of the Ukrainian Carlson special volunteer unit placed a Ukrainian flag on a tower in the wetlands on the left bank of the Dnipro River, approximately 600 meters south of Kherson City and claimed the area will become a Ukrainian bridgehead that will support future operations to further liberate southern Kherson on December 3. ISW does not assess that Ukrainian forces have established a bridgehead or lodgment in this location as Carlson claimed as of December 3. The Carlson element's ability to operate in the area uncontested and the lack of observed Russian fortifications or defensive forces in the area indicate that Russian forces do not exercise full control over the area. Russian control lines are likely south of the Konka River.

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

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

Several Russian sources denounced a Moscow Oblast military commissar's claim that Russian authorities will extend the service period for conscript soldiers from 12 months to 18 for spring 2023 conscripts and two years for fall 2023 conscripts on December 17.⁵³ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) reiterated that Russian law establishes conscripts’ period of service as 12 months and stated that there are no proposed changes to the current law but did not directly acknowledge the origin of the claim.⁵⁴ A Russian-government-aligned Telegram channel that denounces “fake” news stories noted that extending the general term for Russian conscripts would require the State Duma to amend federal law and gain approval from the Russian Federation Council and President Vladimir Putin.⁵⁵ Any legal attempt to extend the general term of service for conscripts would be both extremely unpopular with Russian domestic audiences—even those who support the war—but is also unnecessary if the Kremlin desires to keep conscripts fighting beyond their mandatory service periods. **Russian law designates former conscripts as reservists following their term of conscript service, and all reservists are eligible for immediate mobilization under current Russian law.**

The combination of war and sanctions seems to be starting to generate considerable dislocation of the Russian labor market. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin adopted temporary measures attempting to mitigate the impact of the war and Western sanctions on the Russian labor market on December 17.⁵⁶ A prominent Russian news outlet claimed that these measures partially reimburse employers for creating temporary jobs for citizens at risk of dismissal, organize paid public work projects, and provide for vocational training for industrial enterprise employees at risk of dismissal.⁵⁷ The outlet anticipated over 176,000 Russians will use these measures in 2023.⁵⁸ ISW has previously reported major Russian labor shortages due to the mobilization of a significant portion of the Russian workforce.⁵⁹ The combination of Russian measures to address layoffs and ongoing labor shortages suggests that Russia struggles to support a balanced distribution of labor across industries, facing a shortage in some areas and a surplus in areas that now lack support capacity.

Russian authorities continue efforts to use civilian donations and mandated contributions to finance the war despite common civilian financial hurdles. “Just Russia” Party Leader Sergei Mironov called for the Russian government to begin issuing federal war bonds at an interest rate of 2%.⁶⁰ An opposition Russian news source reported on December 16 that at least two factories of a mineral processing company in Rostov Oblast have withheld 3-5% of workers’ wages for “donations” to the war effort without worker consent since October or December.⁶¹ Another source reported that Russian Pension Fund employees at a single Novosibirsk branch “voluntarily” contributed 18 million rubles (about 277,457 USD) to support military needs.⁶² Novosibirsk Oblast Legislative Assembly Deputy Aleksandr Terepa announced that contributions are completely voluntary and claimed authorities have no need to mandate contributions since all workers are so eager to donate.⁶³ However, ISW has extensively reported on the coercion of Russian workers to “volunteer” for partial salary diversions in support of the war effort in addition to resident-led drives to equip Russian soldiers.⁶⁴

Russian forces continue attempts to discourage desertion through threats of punishment. An open-source intelligence aggregator posted an intercepted call on December 17 in which a Russian wife warns her soldier husband that Russian authorities gather Russian soldiers who lay down their weapons and deploy them straight to the frontlines.⁶⁵ A Russian Telegram channel reported on December 16 that the Lugacom mobile service provider continues to send customers in Luhansk Oblast messages threatening that leaving military positions is criminally punishable desertion.⁶⁶ A Russian news outlet claimed that Russian authorities in Murmansk, Veliky Novgorod, and Solnechnogorsk handed down the first three sentences under Russian articles on desertion and unauthorized abandonment of a unit during mobilization on December 16.⁶⁷ However, Russian authorities appear hesitant to punish deserters through legal channels despite creating conditions so to do. The Russian opposition news source reported that judges waived two of the three sentences and that the third sentence remains unknown.⁶⁸

Western sources continue to confirm that Russian units that were widely considered to be elite prior to the extension of the war in February have suffered significant losses in Ukraine. *The Washington Post* reported on December 16 the 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade (of the 14th Army Corps of the Northern Fleet Joint Strategic Command) sustained devastating casualties as one of the first Russian units to assault Kharkiv City in the early phases of the war and was destroyed.⁶⁹ *The Washington Post* noted that “endemic corruption, strategic miscalculations,” and “Kremlin failure to grasp the true capabilities of its own military or those of its adversary” turned the 200th Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade into a weak, demoralized unit artificially inflated with inexperienced conscripts.⁷⁰ This situation resembles the depleted state of the broader Russian forces and severely limits Russian combat capability, as ISW has previously reported.⁷¹

Russian authorities continue to struggle to monitor mobilized soldiers. A Russian opposition news source reported on December 16 that Moscow police apprehended a mobilized soldier from Nizhny Novgorod walking through the Moscow metro carrying weapons he received in October.⁷² The soldier reportedly left his position due to hospitalization but kept his weapons with him afterward.⁷³ Another Russian source reported on December 16 that authorities discovered a mobilized soldier dead in his tent from undetermined causes at the Sergievsky Training Ground, Sverdlovsk Oblast.⁷⁴

Russian forces appear to be facing logistical hurdles in an effort to gather military equipment in Mariupol due to personnel inefficiency and incompetence. Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported on December 17 that Russian border guards created artificial problems leading to traffic jams with a large amount of military equipment moving from Russia to Mariupol toward Zaporizhia Oblast.⁷⁵ Russian forces in Mariupol also blocked traffic for hours while unsuccessfully attempting to navigate a Buk air defense missile system under a low railway bridge.⁷⁶ Andryushchenko added that Russia forces transport dragon’s teeth fortifications by “continuous caravan” on trucks likely from Stavropol Krai, over 500km from Mariupol.⁷⁷ Russian attempts to export dragon’s teeth over such a great distance would represent a major logistical challenge and resource commitment to the project.⁷⁸

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

Russian forces continue to rely on civilian labor in Russian-occupied territories to construct defensive fortifications in southern Ukraine. Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported on December 17 that Russian forces and occupation officials have posted employment ads for civilians to construct defensive structures in Berdyansk Raion, Zaporizhia Oblast.⁷⁹ Andryushchenko reported that Russian forces previously used similar employment programs to force civilian workers from the Mariupol Ilyich Metallurgical Plant to build fortifications in Kherson Oblast in poor conditions without pay.⁸⁰ ISW has previously assessed that Russian occupation officials have mobilized residents in order to force them into constructing defensive fortifications.⁸¹

Russian occupation officials are likely continuing to try to integrate Chechen elements into occupation administrations. A Russian milblogger posted an image on December 16 showing a propaganda billboard at the Mariupol Ilyich Metallurgical Plant that depicts Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin, Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Chechen Republic head Ramzan Kadyrov.⁸² The Donetsk Oblast occupation administration's inclusion of Kadyrov in its propaganda supports ISW's previous assessment that Russian occupation officials are likely seeking to integrate Chechen officials into their occupation structures.⁸³

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 <http://www.kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70098>

² https://t.me/mod_russia/22712; <https://t.me/readovkanews/49051>

³ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar121422> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar120822> ;

⁴ <https://t.me/strelkovii/3549>

⁵ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar121222>; <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-2>

⁶ <https://www.moscowtimes dot io/2022/12/16/kreml-poruchil-goskorporatsiyam-zapustit-konveier-pozitivnih-novostei-pro-putina-a28893>

⁷ <https://www.moscowtimes dot io/2022/12/16/kreml-poruchil-goskorporatsiyam-zapustit-konveier-pozitivnih-novostei-pro-putina-a28893>

⁸ <https://www.moscowtimes dot io/2022/12/16/kreml-poruchil-goskorporatsiyam-zapustit-konveier-pozitivnih-novostei-pro-putina-a28893>

⁹ <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-14>

¹⁰ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-13>

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

¹³ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>

¹⁴ <https://en.interfax.com dot ua/news/general/815264.html>; <https://www.unian.net/war/vsu-pokazali-video-unichtozheniya-tankovogo-polka-okkupantov-na-harkovshchine-novosti-vtorzheniya-rossii-na-ukrainu-11747701.html>

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- ¹⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/16/world/europe/russia-putin-war-failures-ukraine.html?smid=nytcore-ios-share&referringSource=articleShare>
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