

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, February 5, 2023

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February 5, 9pm 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.

ISW is publishing an abbreviated campaign update today, February 5. This report focuses on Russian President Vladimir Putin’s cautious approach to risk-taking after having thrown the dice on launching a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, an act he likely did not see as a risk. Putin’s hesitant wartime decision making demonstrates his desire to avoid risky decisions that could threaten his rule or international escalation—despite the fact his maximalist and unrealistic objective, the full conquest of Ukraine, likely requires the assumption of further risk to have any hope of success.

Russian President Vladimir Putin’s decisions regarding Ukraine since his initial flawed invasion on February 24, 2022, indicate a likely disconnect between his maximalist objectives and his willingness to take the likely high-risk decisions necessary to achieve them. Putin likely operated under the flawed assumption that Russian forces could force Kyiv to capitulate without any significant military sacrifices and saw Russia’s invasion as a limited and acceptable risk. Captured Russian military plans, for example, revealed that the Kremlin expected Russian forces to capture Kyiv in days, Russian intelligence services reportedly expected the Ukrainian military to collapse, and Kremlin propagandists preemptively published a prewritten article extolling Russia’s “victory” on February 26, 2022.¹ Reports that Putin dismissed the Russian Central Bank’s prescient warnings in February 2022 of the effect of a war in Ukraine on the future of the Russian economy under harsh Western sanctions likely suggest Putin wrongfully assumed the West would not impose major costs on his invasion.² The failure of Russian forces in the Battle of Kyiv—and with it the Kremlin’s war plan—forced Putin to face complex decisions as the Kremlin fought an increasingly costly and protracted conventional war. Putin, however, has remained reluctant to order the difficult changes to the Russian military and society that are likely necessary to salvage his war.

Putin has consistently ignored, delayed, or only partially implemented several likely necessary pragmatic decisions concerning his invasion. Putin was reluctant to order full mobilization following the costly capture of Severodonetsk and Lysychansk in June-July 2022 and several unsuccessful offensives that depleted much of his conventional military. Putin ignored repeated calls from the Russian nationalist community in May 2022 to mobilize reservists, declare war on Ukraine, implement martial law in Russia, and modernize the military call-up system.³ Putin likely feared antagonizing Russian society and instead prioritized recruiting and committing relatively ineffective irregular armed formations over the summer.⁴ Putin also attempted to maintain the façade of a limited war to shield much of Russian society from the scale and cost of the Russian war in Ukraine.⁵ Putin also did not make many public appearances relating to the war effort from the start of the war until mid-December.⁶ Putin additionally did not attempt to silence the large group of Russian pro-war and ultranationalist milbloggers and public figures who supported Putin’s war aims but began to criticize what they perceived as a half-hearted Russian war effort.⁷

Putin continued to select comparatively less risky options even when faced with spiraling military failures in fall 2022. Putin only began to accept domestically unpopular—and potentially risky—policies such as the declaration of partial mobilization or the expansion of martial law far after the dire situation on the front lines following Ukrainian successes made clear the Kremlin required additional combat power.⁸ Putin could have announced a larger mobilization effort than the reported 300,000 servicemen but likely feared that the already unpopular prospect of mobilization would further damage his appeal within Russian society. Putin additionally made a significant rhetorical effort to downplay mobilization by defining it as the mobilization

of select reservists, despite the realities of Russian military recruitment centers being unable to implement such a targeted campaign.⁹ Putin also did not formally declare martial law outside of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts, but instead directed areas outside Ukraine to build out the legal framework necessary to support Russian mobilization.¹⁰ Putin also only selectively appeased milbloggers by meeting some of their demands, such as launching a “retaliatory” strike campaign against Ukrainian energy infrastructure, while refraining from implementing other consequential demands such as clearly defining Russia’s claimed borders.¹¹

ISW assesses the Kremlin and Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is belatedly implementing large-scale-military reforms and treating Ukraine as a protracted and major war—yet Putin is continuing a similar pattern of reserved decision-making. ISW assessed on January 15 that the Kremlin is belatedly taking the personnel mobilization, reorganization, and industrial actions it realistically should have before launching its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.¹² However, Putin is evidently reticent to announce a second wave of mobilization, with US and Western officials noting that Putin is again leaning towards conducting “silent mobilization” due to the concerns over the extreme unpopularity of the first wave of mobilization.¹³ Putin is additionally reportedly conducting surveys to gauge Russians’ perception of mobilization and has not made up his mind on when to start further mobilization, despite Defense Minister Shoigu announcing wide-ranging reforms to increase the manpower of the Russian Armed Forces on January 17.¹⁴ ISW had also observed conflicting messaging from Russian State Duma officials and Kremlin representatives regarding changes to mobilization and conscription protocols, possibly indicating that Putin has ordered the preparation of these provisions but is reluctant to announce them to the public.¹⁵

Putin notably relies on a group of scapegoats to publicly take risks in his place and shoulder the blame for Russian military failures and unpopular policies. Putin allows and at times has contributed to Russian milblogger criticism of the Russian MoD to deflect blame from himself.¹⁶ Putin, for example, positioned Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and the MoD to be the face of his most domestically unpopular decision to date—ordering partial mobilization—by having Shoigu explain mobilization provisions in a televised interview.¹⁷ Putin has also repeatedly blamed the Russian MoD for every problem relating to the execution of partial mobilization and even publicly rebuked the MoD and called on it to listen to criticism.¹⁸ Putin has repeatedly reshuffled the Russian command structure throughout the war and allowed successive commanders to take blame, blaming overall Russian military failures on individual commanders rather than his unrealistic and maximalist objective of seizing all of Ukraine.¹⁹ Putin’s state propaganda networks have also placed responsibility for the controversial Russian withdrawal from west (right) bank Kherson Oblast and Kherson City in November 2022 on the former Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine, Army General Sergey Surovkin (who now serves as deputy Commander of the Russian grouping in Ukraine under the new commander, Army General Valery Gerasimov) and Putin did not comment on this significant Russian loss.²⁰ Putin has regularly used the Russian State Duma to set conditions for controversial decisions in order to frame Putin as balanced leader. Putin has repeatedly snubbed extreme Russian State Duma’s proposals such as the legalization of the Wagner Group in Russia or fully committing to calls to nationalize property from Russians who have fled the country during the war.²¹ Putin has also failed to fully commit to the ultra-nationalist rhetoric that naturally flows from his maximalist invasion of Ukraine, despite using some of its elements in his justification for the war in Ukraine.²²

Putin’s reluctance to take risks directly related to his conventional war in Ukraine indicates that he remains highly unlikely to pursue nuclear escalation or war with NATO. ISW previously assessed that Russian conventional war threats against NATO do not correspond with Russia’s capabilities and that Russia uses nuclear threats primarily to intimidate the West.²³ Putin evidently values his domestic status quo and seeks to avoid risky and controversial policies to support his own aims. Putin also continues to demonstrate that he remains a calculated individual who places considerable emphasis on eliminating risks—even while his perception of the situation he faces diverges from reality. **Putin has thus repeatedly placed himself in the position of articulating maximalist and unrealistic objectives, calling on his government and**

military to achieve them—yet refraining from making the costly decisions the large-scale and protracted conventional war he has embarked on likely requires.

Key inflections in ongoing military operations on February 5:

- **Current Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov (pending a potential reshuffle) stated that Ukrainian officials expect possible Russian offensive operations ahead of the anniversary of the invasion of Ukraine on February 24, but noted that there are no Russian strike groups near Kharkiv City.²⁴**
- **German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated that Ukraine is not using Western-provided weapons to strike Russian territory.²⁵**
- **US officials stated that Russia and Iran plan to build a factory in Russia to manufacture up to 6,000 drones for combat in Ukraine.²⁶ A Russian source claimed that Russian arms company Lobaev Arms is beginning to develop and produce these drones.²⁷**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Kreminna area, and Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces launched renewed offensive operations northwest of Svatove in recent days.²⁸**
- **Russian forces continued to conduct ground attacks around Bakhmut.²⁹ Russian milbloggers are conflicted on whether Ukrainian forces are withdrawing from Bakhmut, as Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin denied claims of a Ukrainian withdrawal.³⁰ ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are likely unable to force an imminent Ukrainian withdrawal from Bakhmut.**
- **Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are transferring reserves in the Vuhledar direction.³¹**
- **Geolocated satellite footage shows that Russian forces built a fortified base on the Arabat Spit in northeastern Crimea between October 18, 2022, and January 21, 2023.³²**
- **The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continue to import medical personnel from Russia to treat wounded military personnel in occupied Luhansk Oblast, supporting ISW's assessment that Russian forces are preparing for a renewed offensive in Luhansk Oblast.³³**

Significant activity in Belarus (ISW assesses that a Russian or Belarusian attack into northern Ukraine in early 2023 is extraordinarily unlikely and has thus restructured this section of the update. It will no longer include counter-indicators for such an offensive.

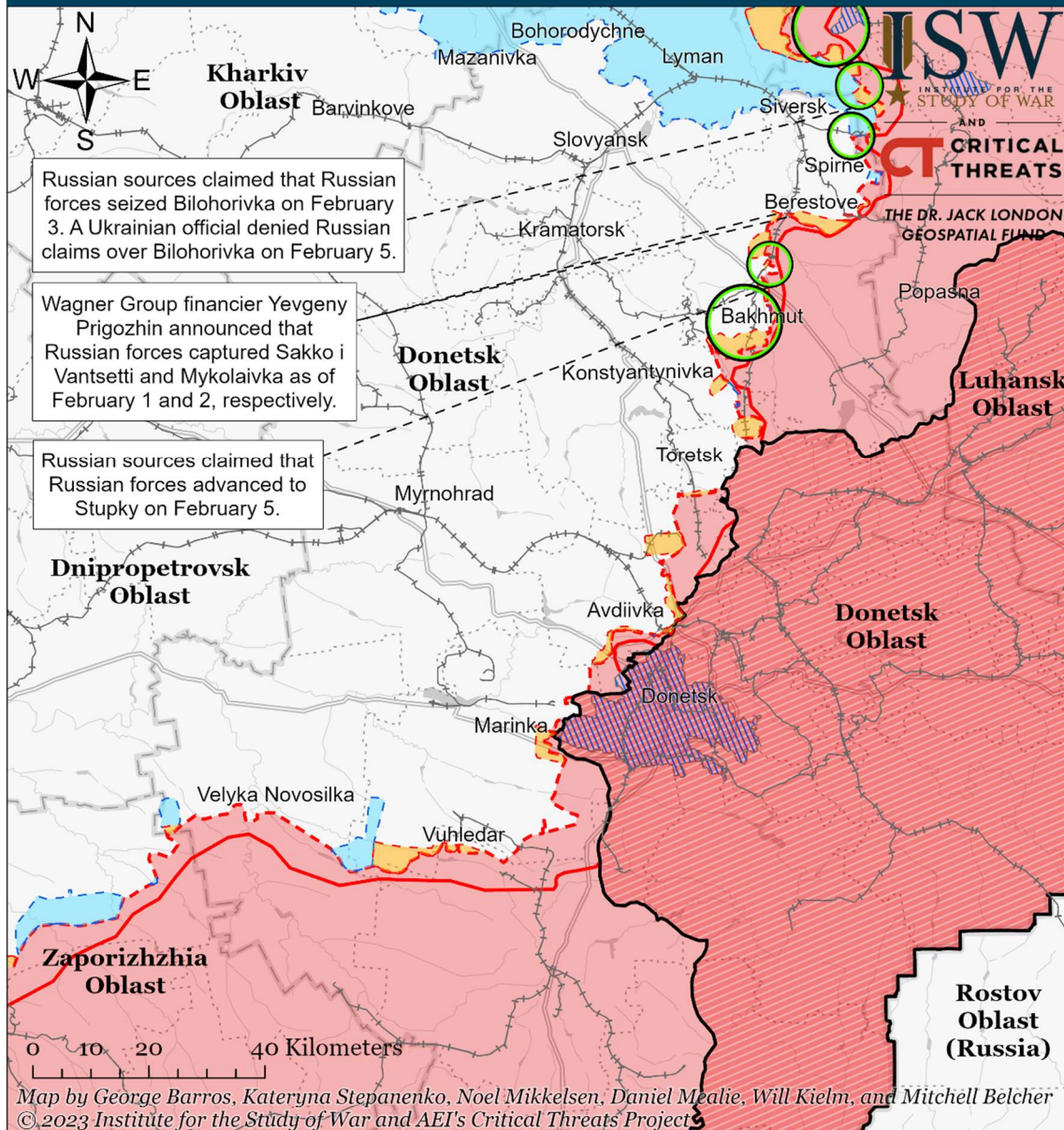
ISW will continue to report daily observed Russian and Belarusian military activity in Belarus, but these are not indicators that Russian and Belarusian forces are preparing for an imminent attack on Ukraine from Belarus. ISW will revise this text and its assessment if it observes any unambiguous indicators that Russia or Belarus is preparing to attack northern Ukraine.)

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov stated on February 5 that Ukrainian officials continue to not observe the formation of Russian assault groups in Belarus necessary for an attack on Kyiv.³⁴ Reznikov reported that there are currently 12,000 Russian servicemembers training at Belarusian training grounds.³⁵

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of February 5, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



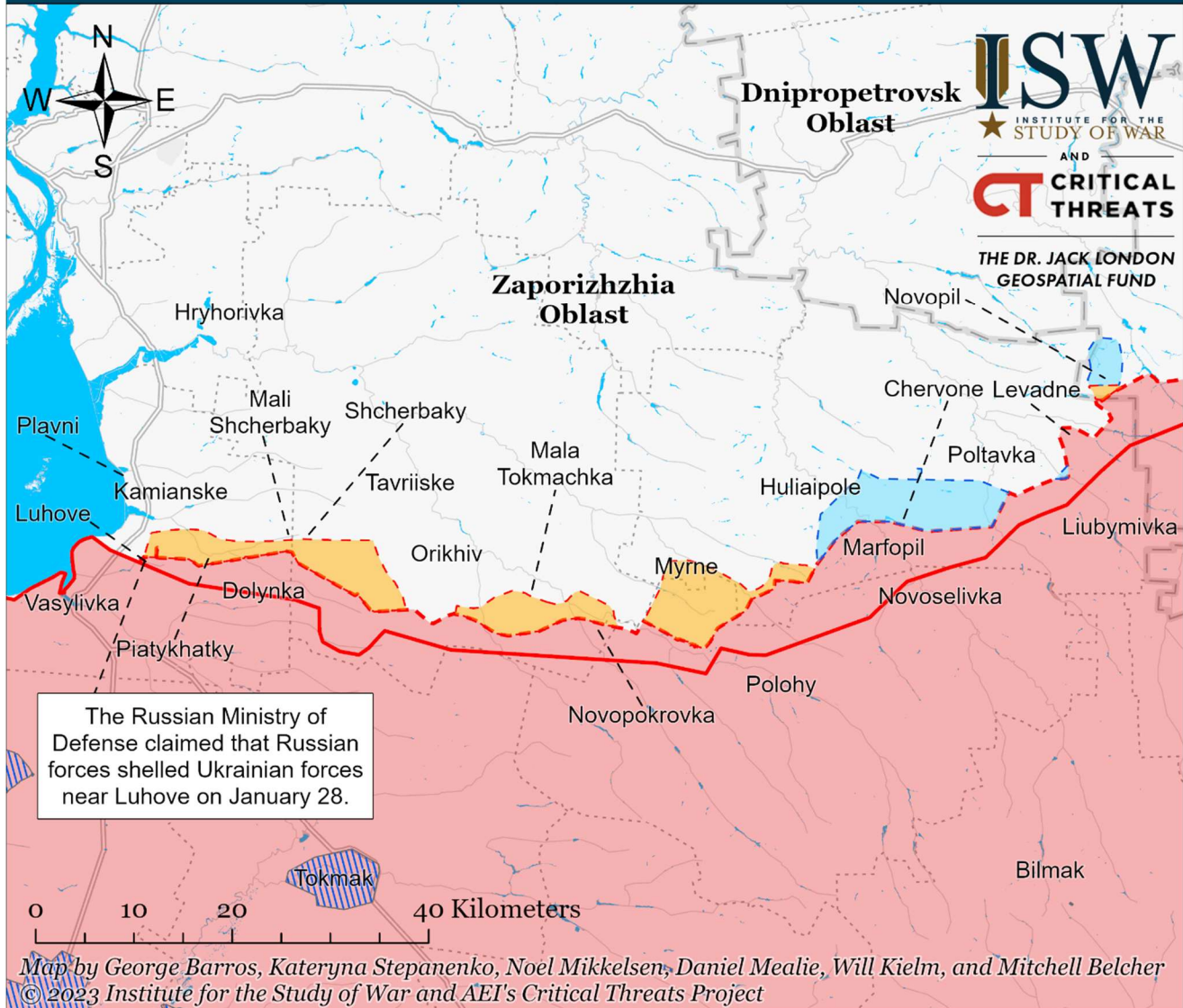
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of February 5, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhia as of February 5, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

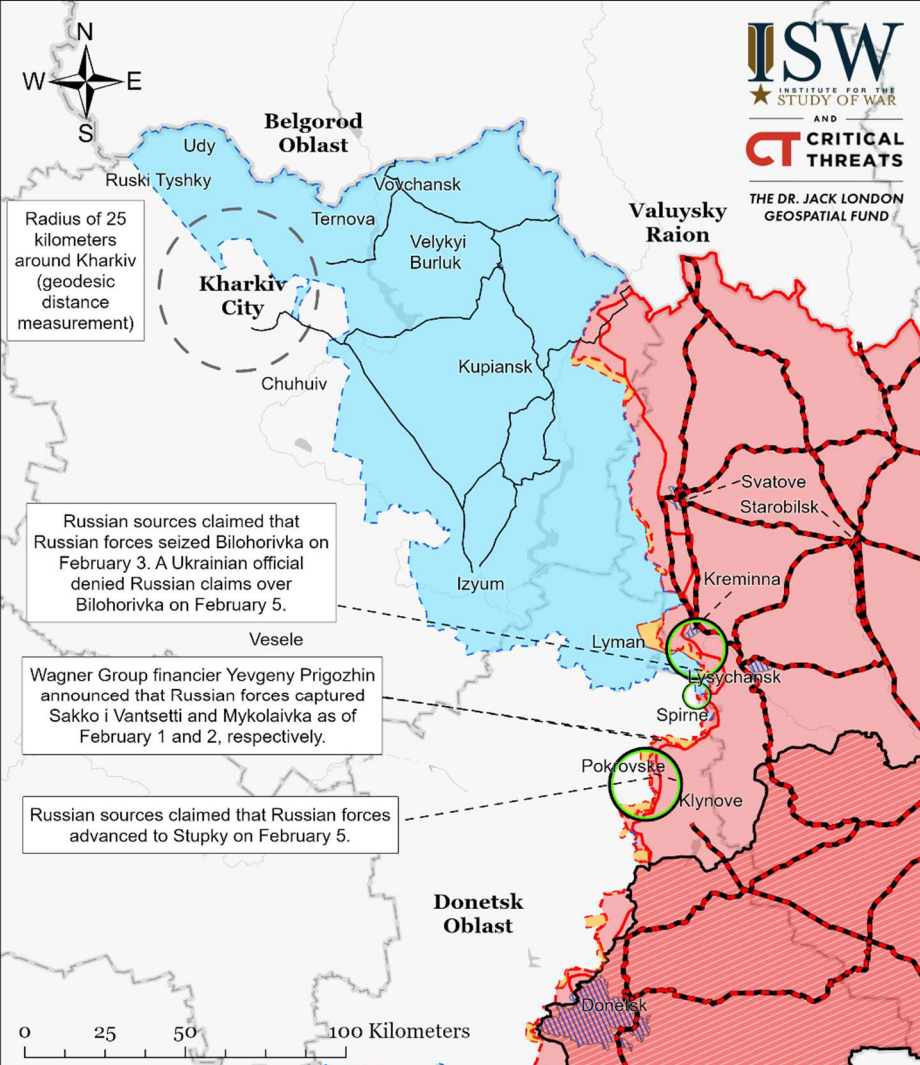
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of February 5, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

ISW recoded the northeast section of Velykyi Potomkin Island in Kherson Oblast from reported Ukrainian counteroffensives to Russian claims based on Russian milblogger reports and video footage published on January 5 that claimed Russian forces recaptured that part of the island where Ukrainian forces placed a flag on January 2. ISW cannot confirm if Russian forces recaptured the same positions as Ukrainian forces as of January 5. A Russian milblogger claimed on January 3 that the island is in a gray zone because Russian forces are still operating in the northern part of the island. Geolocated footage published on January 2 does show Ukrainian forces striking Russian positions on an adjacent island east of Velykyi Potomkin Island, which indicates that Russian forces are still operating within the Dnipro River delta areas.

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of February 5, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Will Kiehn, and Mitchell Belcher © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AET's Critical Threats Project

Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24	Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
Key Ukrainian Roads	Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*	Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
Russian Ground Lines of Communication	Assessed Russian-controlled 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.

The Ukrainian Main Defense Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine published an audio intercept on December 22 in which a Russian soldier operating in the vicinity of Chervonopopivka supported reports that Ukrainian forces captured part of the R-66 Kreminna-Svatove road in the vicinity of Zhytlyvka (just south of Chervonopopivka). The Ukrainian General Staff has repeatedly reported since November 30 that Russian forces shelled Chervonopopivka, indicating Russian forces no longer control Chervonopopivka. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attempted to establish a position in Chervonopopivka on November 27, indicating Ukrainian maneuvers near Chervonopopivka. The R-66 runs through Chervonopopivka and the road's capture by Ukrainian forces would be consistent with the evidence presented in the intercepted phone call plus the Ukrainian General Staff's reports.

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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- ⁴ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-18>;
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