Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 10

Karolina Hird, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, Kateryna Stepanenko, and Frederick W. Kagan December 10, 6:40 pm ET

Click <u>here</u> 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.

An unnamed US defense source told *The Times* that the Pentagon is no longer insisting that Ukraine should not strike military targets within Russia.¹ The source noted that the Pentagon has changed its perspective on this matter following the recent intensification of Russian missile strikes on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure over the last few months and that the Pentagon has become less concerned regarding the risk of escalation, including nuclear escalation, with Russia.² *The Times* suggested that this development is a "green light" for Ukrainian drone strikes on Russian territory.³ Ukrainian commitments to Western partners previously stipulated that Ukraine had the right to use force to regain all its territory, including territory seized by Russia in 2014.⁴ The US has previously not made an effort to prevent Ukraine from striking legitimate military targets located on sovereign Ukrainian territory, and the alleged statement made by the undisclosed US source is an extension of the previous policy. International law allows Ukrainian forces to strike legitimate targets even in Russian territory, especially targets from which Russian forces are launching attacks on Ukrainian civilian infrastructure.

Russian forces conducted attacks against critical infrastructure targets in southern Ukraine using a significantly higher number of Iranian-made drones than in previous weeks. Ukrainian Air Force Command reported on December 10 that Russian forces conducted 15 attacks with Shahed-136 and 131 drones in Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Odesa oblasts and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 10 of the drones.5 Ukrainian Presidential Office Deputy Head Kyrylo Tymoshenko stated that one of the successful Russian drone strikes severely impacted critical infrastructure facilities in Odesa City and that restoration efforts would take longer than usual.⁶ ISW previously assessed that Russian forces still pose a threat to the Ukrainian energy grid and civilian population despite Ukrainian air defenses' high rates of shooting down Russian high-precision weapons systems. 7 ISW also previously assessed that Russian forces likely modified the drones for cooler weather and resumed using Iranian-made drones to strike Ukrainian cities for the first time in three weeks on December 7.8 Russian forces have not used a higher number of Iranian-made drones in attacks on Ukrainian infrastructure since October 23.9 The increased pace of Russian attacks using Iranian-made drones follows a December 9 NBC News report that senior US officials stated that Russia is providing an unprecedented level of military and technical support to Iran in exchange for Iranian-made weapons systems, including drones.¹⁰ The increased pace of Russian drone attacks may indicate that Russian forces accumulated more drones over the three-week period of not using them or that Russia has recently received or expects soon to receive a new shipment of drones from

Russian President Vladimir Putin is risking the loss of support from former proxy republic leaders and veterans due to Russian forces' failure to push Ukrainian forces further west of Donetsk City and to "defend" Donbas. A former Defense Minister of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic (DNR), Igor Girkin, who had also led the siege of Slovyansk in 2014, directly criticized Putin for failing to push Ukrainian forces near Donetsk City out of artillery range even though Putin had identified the protection of Donbas civilians as one of the objectives of the Russian "special military operation." Girkin specifically criticized Putin's December 9 statement, which characterized the progress of the special military operation as "stable," stating that only Putin and the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) see the war as successful. Former DNR Security Minister Alexander Khodakovsky noted emerging criticism of Putin, observing that Putin's long reign has not completely been successful." Khodakovsky also noted emerging discussions of the need to change the state of affairs, alluded to corruption schemes surrounding the reconstruction of Mariupol, and added that Putin had inherited a rather corrupt society that he cannot fix by removing Russian Chief of General Staff Valery

Gerasimov (which Putin has not yet officially done). A prominent Russian milblogger also accused the Russian Armed Forces of failing to conduct counterbattery fire in defense of Donetsk City, despite never having failed to do so during the previous eight years of war.¹³

Girkin's and Khodakovsky's critiques are unprecedentedly direct compared with their previous attacks on the Kremlin. These explicit attacks on Putin may reflect a rift between the pro-war DNR and veteran communities and Putin. The Russian veteran and proxy community had long warned the Kremlin about the design flaws of its military campaign but had rallied behind Putin in the belief that his war – at the very least – would lead to the Russian occupation of Donbas. Had previously also observed video footage of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) refusing to fight for territory in the DNR following the Russian capture of Lysychansk, and it is likely that proxy commanders and ideologists sought to prioritize the occupation of Donbas prior to embarking on Putin's maximalist goal of conquering all of Ukraine. Putin, however, had not delivered on his February 24 rhetorical goal of "saving" people in Donbas by forcing the Kyiv government to capitulate, nor has he accomplished localized military objectives in Donbas. Putin's conditions-setting for a protracted war may further challenge his efforts to appease the ever-growing milblogger community that represents and speaks to important nationalist factions and interests.

Russian authorities are increasingly importing Chechen elements into occupied Ukraine to shape administrative regimes of occupied areas. Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov stated on December 8 that a Chechen delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister Ibragim Zakriev visited Kherson Oblast and met with Kherson occupation Head Vladimir Saldo. 16 Saldo praised the Chechen Republic for being an example of economic well-being, resilience, and growth following years of devastating conflicts and stressed that he hopes to learn from the Chechen experience in developing a model of administration for Kherson Oblast.¹⁷ Ukrainian Melitopol Mayor Ivan Fedorov similarly noted that Kadyrov appointed a Chechen official to "share the experience of the formation of the [Chechen] republic." ¹⁸ Fedorov emphasized that this official is largely meant to maintain control over local pro-Russian collaborators and terrorize the civilian population.¹⁹ The same Chechen delegation also met with the Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration to discuss cooperation and development measures.20 The Chechen Republic and affiliated officials notably have a history of brutality and are not well-renowned for administrative capabilities, but Chechen detachments have played a significant law enforcement role and acted as security services in Russian rear areas in occupied portions of Ukraine throughout the war.²¹ It is therefore likely that Russian occupation administrators seek to integrate Chechen officials into their occupation structures to consolidate their administrative control by capitalizing on Chechen expertise in oppression and security functions. This suggests that dissent and Ukrainian partisan activities are challenging the ability of occupation regimes to govern effectively, and the integration of Chechen models of administration is likely meant as a mitigating factor.

Key Takeaways

- The Times reported that an unnamed US Defense source stated that the Pentagon is no longer insisting that Ukraine refrain from striking military targets in Russia given the ongoing Russian campaign of systematically destroying Ukrainian critical infrastructure.
- Russian forces conducted attacks against Ukrainian infrastructure using a higher number of Iranian-made drones than in previous weeks.
- Putin risks losing support from proxy leaders in Donetsk Oblast due to Russian forces' failure to push Ukrainian forces out of artillery range of Donetsk City.
- Russian authorities are increasingly importing Chechen officials and forces to man administrative regimes of occupied areas.
- Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations toward Svatove, and Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted ground attacks near Kreminna.
- Russian forces continued attempts to advance toward Bakhmut and in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area and to defend their positions in western Donetsk Oblast.

- Russian authorities plan to launch programs in Russia and occupied Ukrainian territories to prepare children for military service.
- Russian forces in occupied Donetsk Oblast are reportedly commandeering civilian utility equipment to construct defensive structures.

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 and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the direction of Svatove on December 10. Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Ukrainian forces are getting closer to Svatove. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully tried to attack the Synkivka-Lyman line (50km northwest of Svatove) and that Russian forces repelled a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group near Dachne (3km west of Svatove). Another Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces periodically attack in the vicinity of the R-66 highway near Svatove, where they reportedly have had minor tactical success. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian and Ukrainian forces are engaged in battles near Novoselivske (14km northwest of Svatove) and that Russian forces control most of the settlement. Russian and social media sources claimed that Ukrainian forces struck Svatove and a Russian rear area in Novopskov (68km northeast of Svatove) with HIMARS rockets and heavy artillery.

Russian forces continued counterattacks in the Kreminna area on December 10. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian counterattacks north of Kreminna near Ploshchanka (16km northwest of Kreminna) and Nevske (18km northwest of Kreminna) and 12km south of Kreminna near Bilohorivka.²⁷ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces also established control over new positions in Bilohorivka.²⁸ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces continued offensive operations in the direction of Lyman and occupied more advantageous lines in the area.²⁹ Haidai stated that Russian forces have tasked newly mobilized forces along the Svatove-Kreminna line to exhaust Ukrainian forces with counterattacks before Ukrainian forces can start a counteroffensive in the direction of Starobilsk (53km northeast of Kreminna).³⁰ ISW previously assessed that Russian forces intend to increase the pace of spoiling attacks in western Luhansk and eastern Kharkiv oblasts to preempt an increased pace of Ukrainian counteroffensive operations in the winter.³¹ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued routine indirect fire along the line of contact in western Luhansk and eastern Kharkiv oblasts.³²

Ukrainian and Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in the Kreminna area on December 10. Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Ukrainian forces are also getting

closer to Kreminna.³³ The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces thwarted Ukrainian assaults in the direction of Chervonopopivka (6km northwest of Kreminna) and Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna).³⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces also conducted assaults near Ploshchanka and that fighting between Ukrainian and Russian forces is ongoing along the Makiivka-Chervonopopivka line.³⁵

Russian Main Effort-Eastern Ukraine

<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk Oblast</u> (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 10. The Ukrainian General staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut; within 18km northeast of Bakhmut near Yakovlivka, Pidhorodne, and Bakhmutske; and within 21km south of Bakhmut near Opytne, Druzhba, and Kurdyumivka.³⁶ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces conducted an assault south of Bakhmut in the direction of Klishchiivka and repelled a Ukrainian counterattack in Opytne.³⁷ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces also continued assaulting Ukrainian fortifications near Bakhmut, where they are reportedly having minor tactical successes.³⁸ Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have not yet captured Opytne and will likely not conduct a full-fledged assault on Bakhmut in the near term due to the likely associated high costs.³⁹ The milblogger claimed that Russian forces intend to bypass Bakhmut from the south through Kurdyumiivka and Klishchiivka and are planning to advance north of Bakhmut in the direction of Soledar.⁴⁰ Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian as well as Russian forces continued to suffer heavy losses in the Bakhmut area.⁴¹

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on December 10. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults within 37km southwest of Avdiivka near Nevelske, Pobieda, and Novomykhailivka.⁴² The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that continued Russian offensive operations pushed Ukrainian forces out of unspecified fortified strongholds in the direction of Donetsk City.⁴³ One Russian milblogger described the fighting in the Avdiivka area as a "sluggish meat grinder."⁴⁴

Russian forces continued to conduct defensive operations in western Donetsk Oblast on December 10. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are defending their positions in this section of the front.⁴⁵ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces thwarted Ukrainian assaults in the direction of Russian positions near Solodke (34km southwest of Donetsk City) and Shevchenko (85km southwest of Donetsk City) and destroyed Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance groups near Volodymyrivka (44km southwest of Donetsk City).⁴⁶ A Russian milblogger claimed that the accumulation of high-rise buildings in Vuhledar (49km southwest of Donetsk City) presents significant tactical difficulties for a potential Russian attack on the settlement.⁴⁷ Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian units of the Eastern Military District (EMD) cannot conduct offensives in the Vuhledar area due to poor weather conditions.⁴⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued routine indirect fire along the line of contact in Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblast.⁴⁹

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

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.

Russian forces continued to shell Ukrainian positions and settlements on the west (right) bank of the Dnipro River on December 10. Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Russian artillery strikes hit a number of settlements along the west (right) bank, including Kherson City.⁵⁰ Social media users reported the sound of Shahed-136 loitering munitions over Velyka Oleksandrivka in northern Kherson Oblast on the night of December 9.⁵¹ Local residents additionally noted the sound of large explosions in Russian rear areas of Kherson Oblast in Chaplynka (along the T2202 Nova Kakhovka-Armiansk route) and Skadovsk (along the P57 Kherson City-Hola Prystan-Skadovsk route).⁵² A Russian milblogger amplified reports that Russian forces attacked the "gray zone" on Potemkin Island (just south of Kherson City in the Dnipro River, on December 9) and claimed that the attack was intended to shield Russian positions in Hola Prystan.⁵³

Russian forces conducted missile, drone, and artillery strikes against areas of Mykolaiv, Zaporizhia, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts on December 10.54 Mykolaiv Oblast Head Vitaly Kim reported that Russian forces struck the water off the coast of Ochakiv with anti-aircraft missiles and noted that Ukrainian air defense shot down two Shahed-136 loitering munitions over Mykolaiv Oblast and two over Kherson Oblast.55 Russian forces additionally struck energy infrastructure in Odesa Oblast on the night of December 9 to 10.56 Russian sources accused Ukrainian forces of shelling the river bank of Enerhodar.57

Ukrainian forces continued strikes against Russian military assets and concentration areas in southern Ukraine on December 10. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that a Ukrainian strike on a Russian concentration area in an unspecified location in Zaporizhia Oblast wounded up to 150 Russian personnel.⁵⁸ Ukrainian sources additionally confirmed that Ukrainian forces struck Russian military assets and command posts near Enerhodar, Molochansk, Tokmak, and Berdyansk, as well as a Buk-M3 air defense system near Vesele with western-provided weaponry.⁵⁹

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

Russian authorities plan to launch programs in Russia and occupied Ukrainian territories to prepare children for eventual military service. The creation of such programs indicates that Russian authorities are investing in long-term force generation capabilities. A Russian anti-mobilization news outlet reported on December 9 that Russian authorities plan to open military training centers in 10 Russian regions to provide children from 14 to 18 with "military sports training" and "patriotic education." Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Presidential Envoy to the Far Eastern Federal District Yury Trutnev announced that the centers will exist because every Russian child should "be able to defend their Motherland" and so that Russian soldiers who fight in Ukraine can "return home alive." Trutnev projected that the spring 2023 pilot program will enroll 45,000 schoolchildren. It is unclear how Russian authorities plan to structure or incentivize enrollment in these programs. Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated on December 10 that occupation authorities in Luhansk Oblast are also introducing military training and "young fighter's courses" in school curriculums. These programs especially target students in the 8th and 10th grades.

Russian forces reportedly continue using harsh measures to intimidate potential deserters. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 10 that Russian forces have begun sending SMS messages warning about criminal liability for leaving points of deployment to Lugacom mobile network subscribers in Luhansk Oblast.⁶⁵

A Russian news source reported on December 9 that mobilized personnel from Serpukhov, Moscow Oblast reestablished contact with their relatives.⁶⁶ ISW reported on November 29 that relatives of the Serpukhov mobilized soldiers had lost contact with their relatives after the soldiers posted a series of videos criticizing the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).⁶⁷ The news source claimed Russian commanders initially "abandoned" the soldiers with no food or support and then threw them to the front lines despite their protests.⁶⁸ The group reportedly suffered many injuries and many are recovering in a military hospital in Moscow.⁶⁹

Russian authorities continue to target Council of Wives and Mothers activists pushing for better conditions for mobilized personnel. Russian news sources reported that Samara Oblast Officials released two Council representatives detained briefly on charges of drug trafficking and distribution of extremist materials on December 8th.⁷⁰ However, the women accused Samara police officers of giving them flat tires to restrict their movement while the women were detained.⁷¹ Russian sources continue to assert that the Council of Wives and Mothers has ties to "extremist" individuals and organizations.⁷²

Russian military officers continue to ineffectively implement mobilization and fail to maintain discipline among soldiers deployed to Ukraine. A Russian news outlet reported on December 10 that a Russian soldier lost control of a grenade launcher at a shooting class and killed another mobilized soldier. A Russian news source reported on December 9 that authorities are investigating the death of a mobilized soldier found dead of no visible causes in a tent in a military tent in Omsk. He Ukraine Resistance Center reported on December 10 that Russian soldiers near Chaplynka, Kherson Oblast stole a car from locals and then crashed after drinking heavily. The center also noted increased numbers of rapes and murders of the Ukrainian civilian population by Russian soldiers. Occupation authorities have reportedly tried to limit the sale of alcohol and forbidden soldiers from carrying weapons in public places to little effect.

Russian authorities also continue pledging to solve bureaucratic issues with mobilization. A prominent Russian news source claimed on December 10 that the Russian MoD will record the names of all volunteers who have not received promised payments in a special register. Russian ruling-party (United Russia) General Council Secretary Andrey Turchak promised on December 9 that he will work with the Russian MoD to resolve the discrepancies in the identification numbers on dog tags issued to soldiers upon mobilization and those issued to them upon conscription. Turchak claimed that this discrepancy has prevented mobilized soldiers from accessing their MoD accounts.

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

Russian forces in occupied Donetsk Oblast are reportedly commandeering civilian utility equipment to support the construction of defensive structures.⁸⁰ Such efforts are almost certainly a consequence of severe Russian equipment shortages. The Ukraine Resistance Center stated on December 10 that the distribution of utility equipment to Russian forces has effectively stopped the work of utility enterprises.⁸¹

Russian occupation authorities continue efforts to administratively integrate occupied territories with Russia. Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) head Denis Pushilin announced on December 10 that the DNR is opening a territorial fund for mandatory medical insurance that will allow Donetsk Oblast residents to receive medical care throughout Russia. Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated on December 10 that entrepreneurs in occupied Luhansk Oblast must register with the unified Russian state registrar by the end of December or lose support measures for small and medium-sized businesses. Russian soldiers and occupation authorities appear to be taking advantage of transitional measures to extort Ukrainian civilians. The Ukraine Resistance Center accused Russian soldiers of stealing Ukrainian cars, cutting off the Ukrainian license plates, re-registering stolen cars with Russian license plates, and exporting the stolen cars for resale in Russia. Police officers in occupied territories reportedly stop owners with Ukrainian cars and invent reasons to extort "fines" during the stop.

Ukrainian Kherson Oblast administration advisor Serhii Khlan stated on December 10 that Russian occupation authorities have announced the construction of a new settlement near Henichesk.⁸⁶ Occupation authorities reportedly stated that the settlement, Niu Vasiuky, will contain new hospitals.⁸⁷ Khlan claimed occupation authorities will fill the hospitals with medical equipment looted from Kherson City.⁸⁸

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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²² https://t.me/serhiy hayday/8893

²³ https://t.me/rybar/41898

²⁴ https://t.me/strelkovii/3510

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