

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 21

**George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, Angela Howard, Layne Philipson,
Madison Williams, and Frederick W. Kagan**
December 21, 7:00 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.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu presided over a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium in Moscow on December 21 and made significant statements pertaining to Russia's ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the strategic direction of the Russian military.

The Kremlin intensified its information operation accusing NATO expansion of presenting a military threat to Russia.¹ Shoigu stated that NATO's military expansion near Russian borders, including Finland's and Sweden's NATO membership aspirations, necessitates an "appropriate" Russian response to establish a Russian force group in northwestern Russia.² Senior Kremlin officials said that the accession of the Nordic states to NATO would not threaten Russia in spring 2022. Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that Finland and Sweden joining NATO would not present an existential threat to Russia in April 2022 and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that Finland and Sweden joining NATO would not make "much difference" in May 2022.³

Shoigu publicly presented a series of proposed Russian defense policy changes to significantly increase the size of the Russian military. Shoigu proposed that Russia reestablish the Moscow and Leningrad military districts, form a new army corps, and form 17 new maneuver divisions.⁴ Shoigu suggested that Russia form a new army corps in Karelia, two new airborne assault divisions, three new motorized rifle divisions in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts, and expand seven existing brigades of the Northern Fleet and Western, Central, and Eastern Military districts into seven new motorized rifle divisions while expanding five existing naval infantry brigades into five naval infantry divisions. Shoigu also proposed that Russia form five artillery divisions to support military districts.⁵ He proposed increasing the strength of the Russian Armed Forces to 1.5 million servicemen, including 695,000 contract servicemen (Shoigu said in spring 2021 that 380,000 Russians were contract servicemen), gradually increasing the age of conscription for military service from 18 to 21 years and raising the age limit for conscripts from 27 to 30 years. Shoigu did not specify a timeline for these measures.

This is not the first time the Russian MoD has signaled its intention to reverse the 2008 Serdyukov reforms that largely disbanded Russian ground forces divisions in favor of independent brigades. The Russian MoD has been steadily reversing the Serdyukov reforms by restoring maneuver divisions across Russian military districts since 2013.⁶

The Kremlin is very unlikely to form such a large conventional force in a timeline that is relevant for Russia's war in Ukraine, however. Forming divisions is costly and takes time. It took the Russian military over a year to reform the 150th Motorized Rifle Division (8th Combined Arms Army) between 2016 and 2017, for example.⁷ Russia was unable to fully staff its existing brigades and regiments before the full-scale invasion and had not fully built out a new division it announced it was forming in 2020 before the start of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine.⁸ Russia's economy is in recession,

and its resources to generate divisions have significantly decreased since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁹ Russia's net training capacity has likely decreased since February 24, in part because the Kremlin deployed training elements to participate in combat in Ukraine and these training elements reportedly took casualties.¹⁰ Russia is reportedly leveraging Belarusian trainers to train mobilized forces and possibly contract soldiers and conscripts, indicating the limitations of Russian training bandwidth.¹¹ Russia's officer corps has been eviscerated by casualties in this war.

Shoigu's proposals could be an overture to placate the milblogger community who have accused the Kremlin of not conducting the war seriously or taking the measures necessary to win the war. It also sets information conditions for the Kremlin to conduct future mobilization waves under the rubric of staffing these formations and/or significantly augmenting Russia's military strength in the long run.

The Kremlin can form a large conventional military along the lines Shoigu described that would be capable of posing a renewed and serious threat to NATO if Russian President Vladimir Putin decides to fundamentally change Russia's strategic resource allocation over the long run. Putin directly addressed Shoigu and the Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov stating that Russia has no financial limitations and must provide everything the Russian Armed Forces request.¹² While Russia is unlikely to reform large divisions while continuing its invasion of Ukraine, Russia's military defeats in Ukraine may persuade Putin to change Russia's strategic resource allocation for the Russian military. Putin can decide to appropriate Russian state funds in such a manner that allows the Kremlin to field a large conventional military at the expense of economic growth and consumer comforts as the Soviets did. Such a course of action would cost resources and time but is possible. Shoigu's "recommendations," which he certainly presented to Putin privately before describing them publicly, along with Putin's commitment to providing the Russian military with everything it needs and a number of other indicators suggest that Putin may have already decided to reconstitute a significant conventional Russian military threat to Europe once this war ends.

Putin and Shoigu demonstrated that Russia is not interested in reducing its war efforts or its war aims, despite the growing toll on Russian society. Putin reiterated that Russia will ensure the safety of all Russian territories including illegally-annexed territories in Ukraine while at the MoD Collegium.¹³ Putin and Shoigu repeatedly rejected the idea of independent Ukrainian sovereignty and emphasized Russia's need to keep Ukraine within the Kremlin's sphere of influence and defeat the Ukrainian "Nazi" regime.¹⁴ Putin and Shoigu's comments further illustrate that the Kremlin retains maximalist goals for the war in Ukraine that include: the recognition of illegally annexed territories, regime change of the Ukrainian government under the pretext of "denazification," control of Ukraine's political and social character, and Western granting of Russia's desired "security guarantees."

The reiteration of Putin's February 24 goals indicates that the Kremlin is deciding to embrace the sacrifices of the war and attempt to push on to victory. The Kremlin will need to continue to ask for and justify great sacrifices from its people to pursue these unrealistic goals. Shoigu attempted to justify the societal cost of mobilization, acknowledging that mobilization was "a serious test" for Russian society necessary to defend newly acquired territories in Ukraine.¹⁵ Putin likely believes that if he downscaled his maximalist set of goals or defined lesser short-term objectives he would incur widespread discontent from both the wider Russian public and the ultra-nationalist pro-war community for committing Russia to a costly war in pursuit of an inadequate reward. The Kremlin will likely continue to reiterate maximalist goals as it demands further sacrifices from the Russian public to support the war effort, whether through new force generation efforts, imposing the continued

long-term economic impacts of international sanctions regimes, extracting from the populace the cost of rebuilding a powerful Russian military, or forcing the Russian people to continue to accept heavy Russian casualties in Ukraine.

Putin and Shoigu maintained the Kremlin's information operation that seeks to coerce the West into pushing Ukraine to negotiate on Russia's terms. Shoigu claimed during his speech that the Kremlin is always open to holding constructive, peaceful negotiations.¹⁶ Putin and Shoigu likely reiterated Russian maximalist goals at the Russian MoD Collegium at a time when Ukrainian officials are discussing the possibility of a renewed Russian large-scale offensive in the winter of 2023 and voices are rising in the West calling for Ukraine to initiate negotiations with Moscow to add further pressure on Ukraine to negotiate on Russian terms.¹⁷ The Kremlin likely believes that it will be able to exact more preemptive concessions from Ukraine the more maximalist its stated goals for the war are as it also prepares what it is presenting as another large-scale offensive operation. The Kremlin's effort to coerce Ukraine into negotiating or offering preemptive concessions is increasingly divorced from the battlefield reality in Ukraine where Ukrainian forces retain the initiative.¹⁸

Putin significantly intensified his efforts to make peace with the critical pro-war community in the past 48 hours. Putin admitted at the MoD collegium meeting that Russian forces had faced challenges with mobilization, lack of drones and new equipment, and signals.¹⁹ Shoigu acknowledged similar concerns echoing criticism from prominent Russian milbloggers for 10 months of the war.²⁰ Putin then asked the Russian MoD "to be attentive" to all criticism and "hear those who do not hush up the existing problems," noting that the ministry will be in constant dialogue with such critics.

Putin also established a working group on December 20 that will address issues with mobilization and offer social and legal support for participants of the "special military operation," empowering some milbloggers.²¹ Putin recruited several prominent milbloggers such as Mikhail Zvinchuk from *Rybar*, Evgeniy Poddubny, and Alexander Sladkov among others, as well as some state officials to compile a monthly report to be delivered directly to Putin. The working group has the authority to make proposals and review mobilization concerns.

Putin is likely seeking to preempt further criticism and regain control over the domestic narrative in support of a protracted war. Putin has exhibited a pattern in which he gradually grants a level of limited authority to select milbloggers following an increase in criticism. ISW observed that Putin first interacted with milbloggers in mid-June shortly following Russia's failed crossing of the Siverskyi Donets River and general frustrations with Russia's slow pace in Donbas.²² Putin has since made several public statements in support of frontline and mobilization coverage and even appointed a prominent milblogger and correspondent for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, Alexander (Sasha) Kots a member of the Russian Human Rights Council on November 20.²³ Kots previously operated in Kherson City, and his appointment followed Russia's withdrawal from right-bank Kherson Oblast. Putin likely that Putin intended to coopt Kots following that withdrawal.

Putin remains unlikely to persecute Russian milbloggers due to his commitment to continue this war and is likely attempting instead to introduce a culture of self-censorship within the milblogger community. The Kremlin has historically allowed for "domesticated opposition" - or figures who criticized the Russian government for issues such as corruption instead of opposing the nature of the regime - and it is likely that Putin is using a similar approach with controllable milbloggers.²⁴ Putin is

attempting to disincentivize milbloggers from eventually turning on him by integrating them into his circle.

Putin may also attempt to recruit additional milbloggers from other nationalist factions in the information space. Putin's mobilization group notably did not include figures closely affiliated with the Wagner Group or Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, and instead targeted a group that has already gained some prominence on Russian state outlets. Putin has notably refrained from giving Wagner Group financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin an official position within the Russian government even though Prigozhin supposedly directly reports on Russia's military failures to Putin and is contributing his forces to Putin's war.²⁵ Prigozhin remains simply the de facto head of a nominally illegal mercenary group even as milbloggers secure formal, if sometimes ad hoc, official positions.

Putin's ability to sustain his narrative is vulnerable to his inability to deliver on his maximalist goals and promises in the long run. Putin and Shoigu assured the collegium that Russia will learn from the mistakes of the "special military operation" and promised to implement several changes to remedy problems within the war effort. Russia, however, is unlikely to efficiently address the fundamental flaws of its military structure—certainly not in any short period of time—and that failure will likely revitalize criticism. Putin will also need to continue to deflect blame from himself for failing to deliver on such promises onto the Russian MoD without destroying the credibility of the MoD and the uniformed military in the eyes of the Russian population. **Putin's consistent appeasement of the milbloggers demonstrates that he recognizes their influence on the Russian people of whom he asks such tremendous sacrifices to sustain his war effort.**

Putin and Shoigu continued to use descriptions of heightened nuclear readiness to appease domestic nationalist audiences and intimidate Western audiences without enunciating new policies or any fundamental changes in Russia's nuclear posture or capabilities.²⁶ Putin stated that Russian forces will continue to develop Russia's nuclear triad as the main guarantor of Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁷ Putin and Shoigu claimed that modern weapons compose 91.3% of Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal, that Russian forces are fielding Avangard hypersonic warheads, and that Russian forces will soon introduce Sarmat intercontinental ballistic missiles into active service.²⁸

Such descriptions are extremely unlikely to represent enhanced Russian willingness to use nuclear weapons. The Kremlin routinely uses nuclear rhetoric to project strength to the far-right Russian community, which has accused the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) of failing to take sufficiently aggressive steps to support the war in Ukraine and to demand that the West reduce its "escalatory" provision of aid to Ukraine and to pursue negotiations on Russian terms by hinting at the possibility of nuclear escalation. ISW has extensively reported on previous incidents in which Russian officials have referred to nuclear weapons to influence Western and domestic audiences and assessed that Russian officials have no intention of actually using nuclear weapons on the battlefield.²⁹

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky traveled to Washington, DC to meet with US leaders on December 21. This is Zelensky's first trip outside Ukraine since the escalation of Russia's war on February 24.³⁰ ISW will report on the details of Zelensky's visit and Russian reactions to the visit on December 22. Russian officials, media sources, and milbloggers have continuously expressed concern over the closeness of the Ukraine-US relationship and demoralization over the effectiveness of US and Western aid to Ukraine. The recent finalization of US plans to provide

Patriot missile defense systems to Ukraine sparked a flurry of Russian discussions over the likely significant effects that Patriots will have on the war and the attack opportunities that Russia missed before the US agreed to provide Patriot systems.³¹ ISW has noted similar Russian responses to the US provision of HIMARS systems to Ukraine.³²

Key Takeaways

- **Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu proposed a series of expansive reforms and goals for Russian force generation that Russia is highly unlikely to complete in time to be relevant to the current conflict.**
- **Putin and Shoigu reiterated maximalist Russian aims for the war in Ukraine.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin has intensified efforts to make peace with the critical pro-war nationalist community. Russian failures to achieve Putin's stated goals jeopardize Kremlin efforts to regain control over the domestic narrative and to set conditions for the second year of the war.**
- **Russian nuclear rhetoric is most likely an attempt to appease domestic audiences and intimidate Western audiences and not an indicator of preparation to use nuclear weapons.**
- **Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky traveled to Washington, DC on December 21. ISW will report on the details of Zelensky's visit and Russian reactions to the visit on December 22.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian forces continued counterattacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut and Donetsk City areas.**
- **A Ukrainian official confirmed that Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to establish control over the Dnipro delta islands.**
- **Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu boasted about the growing Russian Young Army Cadets National Movement (Yunarmia) movement.**
- **Russian officials intensified law enforcement crackdowns to deter partisan activities and target partisan sympathizers.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 21, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

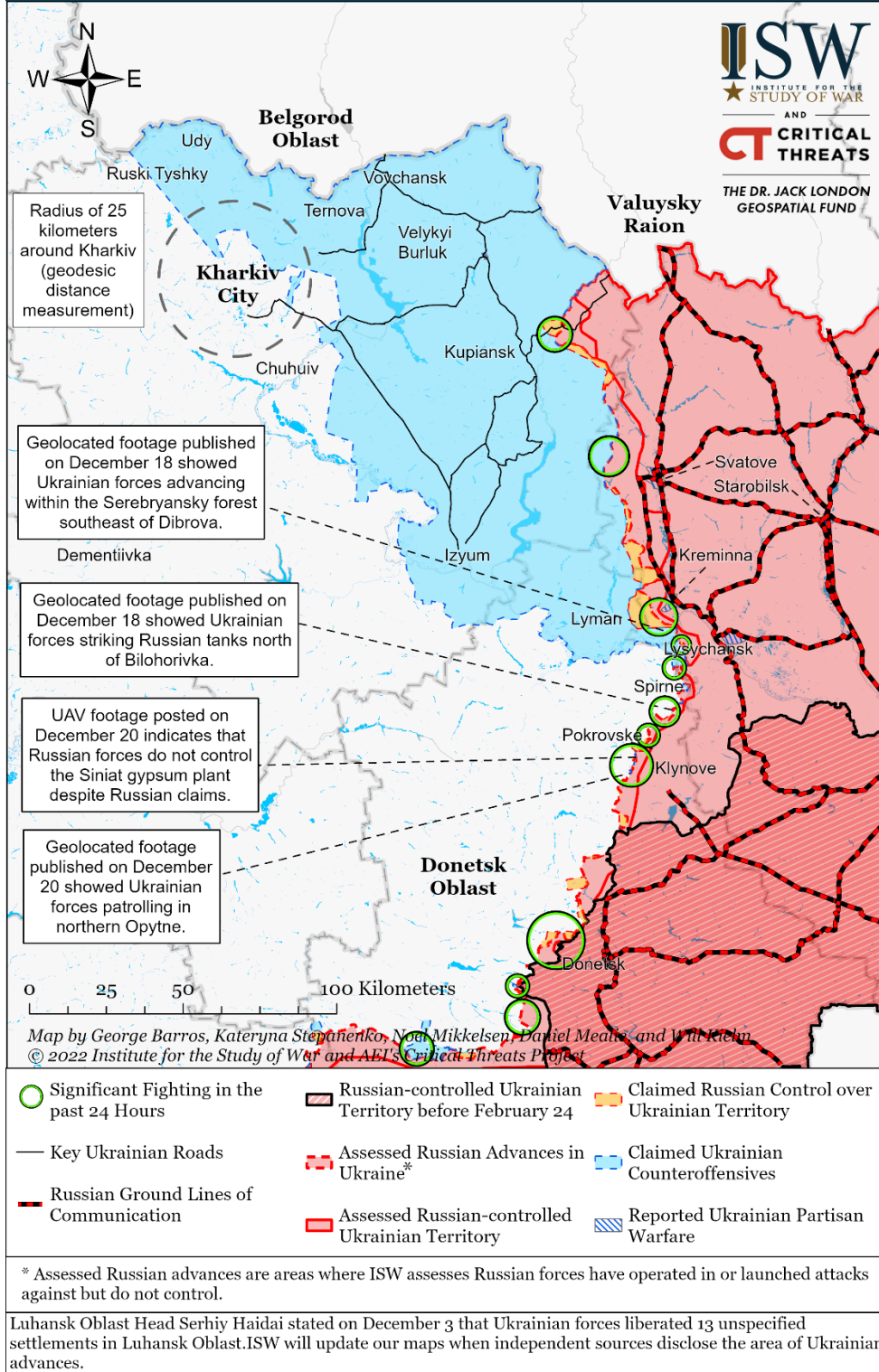
Ukrainian Counteroffensives (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

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

Russian forces continued to conduct limited counterattacks to recapture lost territory along the Kreminna-Svatove line on December 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Masyutivka, Kharkiv Oblast (50km northwest of Svatove) and Pidkyuchansk, Luhansk Oblast (8km northwest of Svatove).³³ A Russian milblogger claimed that the capture of Masyutivka is a prerequisite for a Russian advance towards Kupyansk from the northeast.³⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted an assault near Stelmakhivka (16km northwest of Svatove) and Chervonopopivka (6km north of Kreminna).³⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna) and Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna).³⁶

Ukrainian forces reportedly continued counteroffensive operations in the Kreminna area on December 21. Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai reported that Ukrainian forces are currently a few kilometers away from reaching Kreminna but that dense mine concentrations in the area are slowing Ukrainian advances.³⁷ Russian milbloggers posted footage purporting to show the aftermath of Russian forces repelling a Ukrainian assault in the vicinity of Kreminna.³⁸ Haidai reported that decreasing temperatures have produced conditions more conducive to fighting and that he expects current Ukrainian counteroffensive operations to experience success by the end of the year with the intensified pace of fighting.³⁹ The Ukrainian General Staff confirmed that Ukrainian forces destroyed Russian ammunition depots near Kadiivka (60km southeast of Kreminna) on December 15 and 16.⁴⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of December 21, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

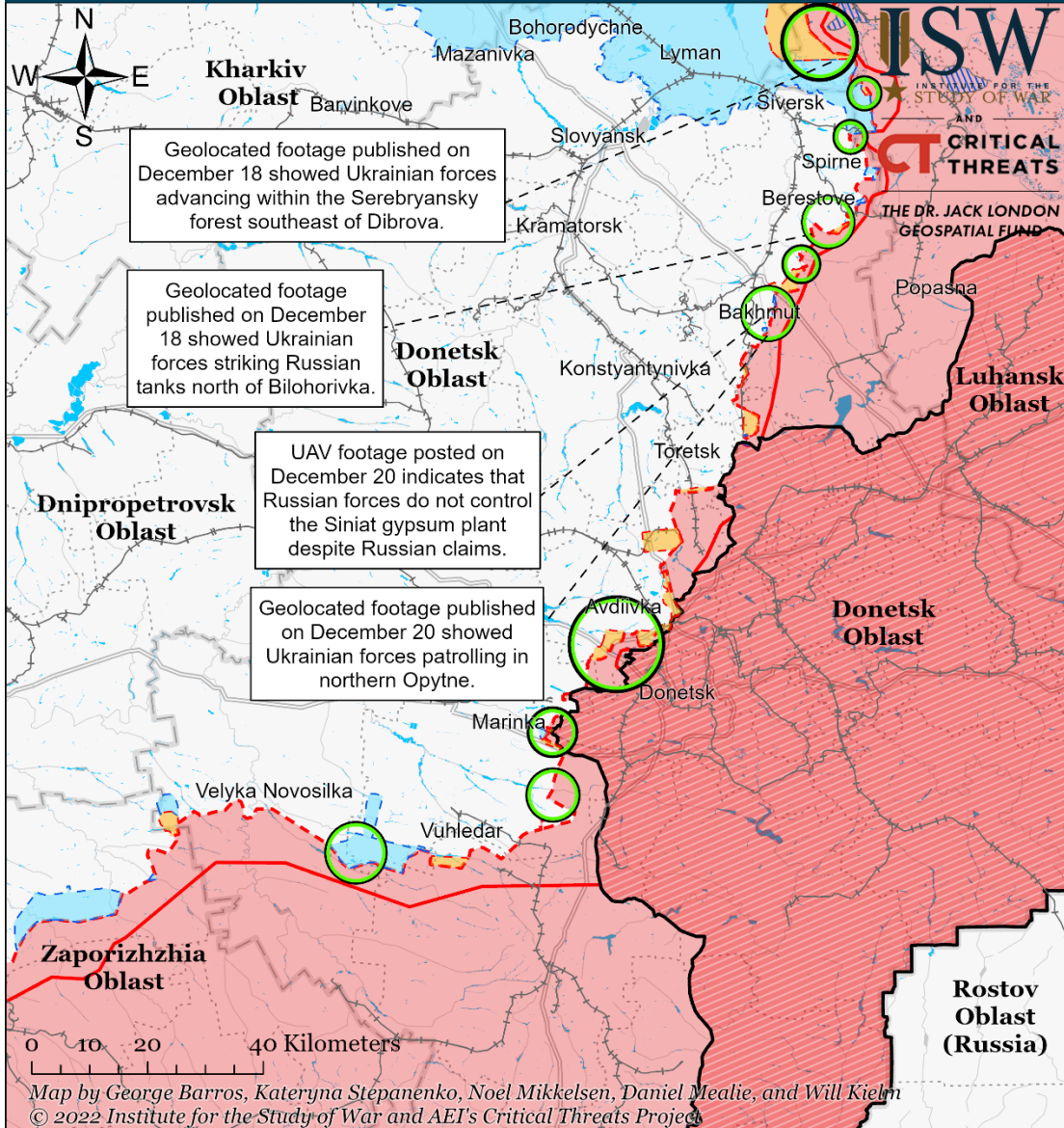
Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on December 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut and within 33km north of Bakhmut near Verkhokamisne, Vesele, Yakovlivka, and Bakhmutske.⁴¹ A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Wagner Group conducted an assault northeast of Bakhmut near Pidhorodne and that fierce fighting continues on the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut.⁴² A Ukrainian commander reported that Russian forces do not control the industrial zone on the eastern outskirts of Bakhmut, an area that has been hotly contested in recent weeks.⁴³ The Ukrainian commander reported that a preponderance of Ukrainian drone surveillance in Bakhmut allows Ukrainian forces to quickly neutralize small Russian units that penetrate the outskirts of the city.⁴⁴ Ukrainian social media sources claimed that Ukrainian forces completely repelled Russian forces from the outskirts of Bakhmut, although ISW cannot independently verify these claims.⁴⁵ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces storming Bakhmut have not made significant progress.⁴⁶ Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces are constructing defensive fortifications and preparing for street fighting in Bakhmut.⁴⁷ A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Wagner Group also conducted an assault south of Bakhmut from the direction of Kurdyumivka and that fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces continued in Opytne.⁴⁸

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on December 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults within 37km southwest of Avdiivka near Vodyane, Pisky, Nevelske, Marinka, and Novomyhailivka.⁴⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are unable to conduct a frontal assault on Avdiivka due to the lack of personnel in the Russian grouping in the area and the presence of serious Ukrainian fortifications around the settlement.⁵⁰ Russian milbloggers claimed that fighting between Russian and Ukrainian forces is ongoing within Marinka and that Russian forces currently control 80 percent of the settlement.⁵¹ Russian milbloggers described Russian advances in Marinka as slow and claimed that both Ukrainian and Russian forces in the city are suffering heavy infantry losses.⁵²

Russian forces conducted a limited ground assault in western Donetsk Oblast on December 21. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault near Prechistivka, Donetsk Oblast (57km southwest of Donetsk City).⁵³ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Russian forces continued routine indirect fire along the line of contact in Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.⁵⁴

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of December 21, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

Russian forces conducted limited assaults to regain lost positions in southern Kherson Oblast and continued shelling settlements in Kherson, Zaporizhia, and Dnipropetrovsk oblasts.⁵⁵ Ukrainian Spokesperson for the Southern Defenses Nataliya Humenyuk stated on December 21 that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attempts to establish control over the islands of the Dnipro delta over an unspecified time frame and that Russian forces may attempt future efforts to seize the islands.⁵⁶ The head of the Ukrainian Joint Press Center of the Tavrisk Direction Defense Forces, Yevheny Yeri, emphasized on December 21 that Russian forces are moving forces in lower Kherson Oblast to support the construction of second and third lines of defense in the direction of Zaporizhia Oblast and Kherson City and are not demonstrating signs of retreat.⁵⁷ This supports and clarifies statements made by Yeri on December 19 describing Russian withdrawals of main units along the Dnipro River from Ukrainian artillery range, on which ISW previously reported.⁵⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces have been preparing for forcible evacuations of Ukrainian residents in Vasylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, and nearby settlements of Vasyliv Raion in Zaporizhia Oblast since December 12.⁵⁹

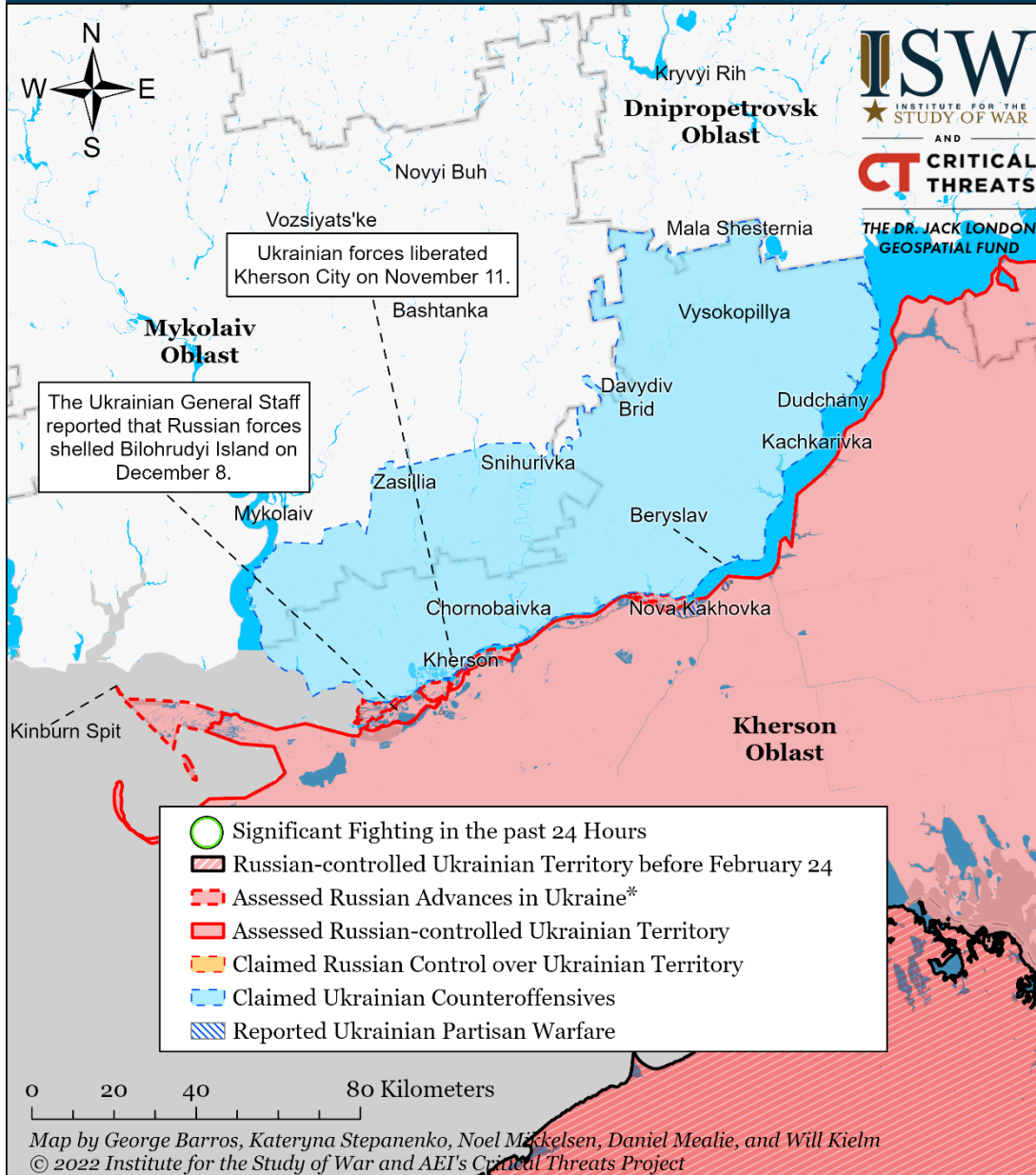
Ukrainian forces continued to target Russian force concentrations and rear areas of Kherson Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian force group and concentration of 30 artillery pieces at an airfield near Kakhovka, Kherson Oblast on December 20.⁶⁰ Ukrainian sources amplified reports from residents of explosions from unspecified causes near Velyka Lepetykha in Russian-occupied eastern Kherson Oblast on December 21.⁶¹ Satellite imagery showed Russian forces in Chaplynka (16km from the border of Kherson Oblast and Crimea) attempting to obstruct satellite imagery by installing covers over revetments.⁶² Separate imagery of Chaplynka taken on December 14 shows a seemingly abandoned Chaplynka airbase.⁶³ The Ukrainian General Staff further confirmed that Ukrainian forces struck a concentration of Russian soldiers and equipment and destroyed 8 pieces of heavy military equipment in the vicinity of Vasylivka, Kherson Oblast on December 19.⁶⁴ Russian forces are likely making renewed efforts to obscure their positions in eastern Kherson Oblast.

Russian sources continue to accuse Ukrainian forces of striking Enerhodar to fuel false rhetoric surrounding a Ukrainian threat to the Zaporizhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP). A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on December 21 that Ukrainian forces opened fire on Enerhodar and caused three explosions in the industrial zone and along the shore.⁶⁵ Another Russian milblogger alleged that Ukrainian forces struck Enerhodar using unspecified NATO-provided artillery.⁶⁶ Russian Ambassador to Vienna Mykhailo Ulyanov stated on December 21 that the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Raphael Grossi, is scheduled to visit Moscow to discuss the potential for the creation of a safety zone around ZNPP on December 22.⁶⁷

Russian forces in Crimea continue to build defensive fortifications amidst discussions of potential Ukrainian attacks. The Ukraine Center for Strategic Communication and Information Security reported on December 21 that Russian forces are requiring residents with beachfront property in Mizhvodne to vacate the premises for interfering with defensive construction efforts.⁶⁸ The Ukraine Center for Strategic Communications and Information Security further noted that occupation authorities have taken steps to strengthen the military-industrial complex in Crimea.⁶⁹ A prominent Russian milblogger

claimed that Ukrainian forces are concentrating reconnaissance efforts on searching for holes in Russian defenses in Crimea in hopes of breaking Russian morale.⁷⁰

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 21, 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.

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

Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu boasted about the growing Russian Young Army Cadets National Movement (Yunarmia) at the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium on December 21. Shoigu claimed the Yunarmia movement presently consists of more than 1.251 million children and teenagers.⁷¹ The Yunarmia movement provides Russian children with military and "patriotic" education and likely represents Russian attempts to invest in long-term force generation, as ISW has previously reported.⁷² Shoigu alleged that Russian authorities will open 20 regional centers and 25 urban centers for military and patriotic education of "Avangard" youth by the end of 2022.⁷³ Shoigu claimed more than 150,000 Russian high schoolers have already trained in such centers.⁷⁴

Russian authorities are likely unofficially mobilizing migrants for the war in Ukraine. Independent Russian media outlet *SOTA* reported that Moscow authorities are rounding up migrants without Russian citizenship in the city and forcing them to register as volunteers with Moscow's military registration and enlistment offices.⁷⁵ *SOTA* reported that authorities threaten the migrants who refuse to comply with problems at the migrants' places of work.⁷⁶

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin defended his convict recruitment tactics against accusations of illegality by imprisoned opposition figure Aleksei Navalny. Navalny tweeted on December 21 that Prigozhin visited his maximum-security penal colony, IK-6, in Melekhovo on an unspecified date and offered convicts pardons for their crimes should they survive 6 months with Wagner Group forces.⁷⁷ Navalny stated that 80-90 convicts accepted Prigozhin's offer.⁷⁸ Prigozhin responded to questioning about Navalny's criticisms on December 21, stating that he personally sees nothing reprehensible about his recruitment tactics and that "no one can deprive a person of the right to defend his Motherland."⁷⁹

Russian forces continue to struggle with extremely low morale resulting from horrible conditions despite promises from Russian President Vladimir Putin and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu that they are actively listening and taking measures to improve conditions. An open-source intelligence aggregator amplified a report from a Russian volunteer concluding that Russian forces are completely unprepared for a winter Ukrainian counteroffensive.⁸⁰ The Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) published an intercepted phone call in which a Russian soldier tells his mother that Russian friendly fire is more dangerous to Russian soldiers than Ukrainian forces.⁸¹ A Russian source reported on December 19 that a mobilized soldier from Bratsk, Irkutsk Oblast called his sister begging her to get him away from the frontlines despite initially deciding not to resist mobilization.⁸² The soldier described graphic deaths of fellow soldiers, heavy losses, a lack of food, and the generally poor emotional state of deployed soldiers.⁸³ An independent Russian news outlet stated on December 20 that the entirety of the Russian 127th Reconnaissance Brigade (military unit 67606) refused to participate in the war in Ukraine due to heavy losses.⁸⁴ Another Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian soldiers within Russia continue to face poor conditions.⁸⁵ Russian authorities reportedly forced conscripts in a unit near Bryansk, Russia to live in unheated abandoned houses and to move into trenches to make room for mobilized soldiers.⁸⁶

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 officials intensified law enforcement crackdowns to deter partisan activities in occupied territories on December 21. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 21 that the Russian Duma passed a law that stipulates life imprisonment for facilitating subversive activities.⁸⁷ The law identifies facilitating subversive activities as an activity related to inciting, recruiting, or involving a person in carrying out sabotage, arming or training of others for this purpose, as well as financing sabotage.⁸⁸ The Ukrainian Resistance Center emphasized that Russian officials deem any resistance to occupation "sabotage" and that the Duma adopted this law specifically to punish residents accused of assisting saboteurs in occupied territories.⁸⁹

Russian occupation authorities continue to consolidate administrative control of Russian-occupied territories. Luhansk Oblast Administration Head Serhiy Haidai stated on December 21 that Russian authorities transferred 15 officials from Novosibirsk, Russia, to serve as occupation officials in occupied-Bilovodsk, Luhansk Oblast.⁹⁰ Zaporizhia Oblast occupation deputy Vladimir Rogov stated on December 21 that Zaporizhia and Luhansk occupation administrations appointed new heads for Children's Rights and amplified Russian Presidential Commissioner for Children's Rights Maria Lvova-Belova's statement that she works closely with occupation officials on the issues of children's rights.⁹¹

Russian forces and occupation officials continue to seize and redirect civilian infrastructure to support Russian forces. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 21 that Russian forces converted a civilian hospital in Novotroitsky, Kherson Oblast, into a military hospital and forcibly discharged sick Ukrainian civilians to treat wounded Russian servicemen.⁹² Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated on December 21 that Russian occupation officials also converted a civilian hospital in Luhansk City, into a military hospital to treat wounded Russian servicemen and servicemen of Russian private military companies (PMCs).⁹³ Haidai also stated that Wagner PMC troops are treated in a maternity ward in Pervomaiske, Luhansk Oblast.⁹⁴ The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 20 that Russian occupation officials seized four hospitals in Donetsk Oblast to treat wounded Russian servicemen, and that most of the hospital staff are Russian citizens who refuse to treat Ukrainian civilians.⁹⁵ The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported on December 20 that Russian forces seized a civilian morgue in Horlivka, Donetsk Oblast, to hold deceased Russian servicemen.⁹⁶

Russian officials are continuing efforts to deport Ukrainian civilians under the guise of medical rehabilitation and adoption schemes. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 21 that Russian officials are transporting Ukrainian children from boarding schools to remote regions in Russia, including Leningrad, Volgograd, Novosibirsk, and Tymen oblasts, for forcible adoption.⁹⁷ The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported on December 21 that Russian officials are forcibly transferring Ukrainian mental hospital patients in occupied Nova Kakhovka and Oleshky, Kherson Oblast, to the "Geolog" Recreation Base in occupied- Strilkove, Kherson Oblast.⁹⁸

Russian occupation authorities continued taking steps to consolidate economic control of occupied territories and force Ukrainian civilians to switch to the ruble on December 21. Head of the Zaporizhia Oblast occupation administration Yevheny Balitsky stated on December 21 that all financial transactions in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast will be conducted in rubles only after January 1, 2023 and

that residents of occupied Zaporizhia Oblast have until December 31, 2022, to transfer hryvnias to rubles.⁹⁹

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://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukraine%20Indicators%20Update.pdf>

² <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/16653483>

³ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-says-finland-sweden-joining-nato-makes-no-big-difference-2022-05-17/>;

<https://www.kommersant dot ru/doc/5295748>

⁴ <https://t.me/epoddubny/14277>; <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/16655079>

⁵ <https://t.me/epoddubny/14277>; <https://tass dot ru/armiya-i-opk/16655079>

⁶ <https://rg dot ru/2016/04/23/reg-ufo/soedinenie-iug-pokoritel.html>;

https://web.archive.org/web/20190227151439/https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=11735703@egNews;

https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Ground%20Forces%20OOB_ISW%20CTP_0.pdf

⁷ <https://rg dot ru/2016/04/23/reg-ufo/soedinenie-iug-pokoritel.html>;

https://web.archive.org/web/20170923032602/https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12108737@egNews

⁸ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/belarus-warning-update-russia-fields-new-motor-rifle-division-kaliningrad-and-conducts>

⁹ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2022/12/05/russias-economic-prospects-have-gone-from-bad-to-terrible/?sh=2ade3afa74bc>; <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/publication/rer>; <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/russias-economy-end-2022-deeper-troubles>; <https://www.reuters.com/business/retail-consumer/russian-economy-will-not-return-pre-war-levels-until-2030-scope-2022-09-16/>

¹⁰ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-25>

¹¹ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-11>;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Offensive%20Campaign%20Assessment%2C%20December%20%20PDF.pdf>

¹² <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>

¹³ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>

¹⁴ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>

¹⁵ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>

¹⁶ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>

¹⁷ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar121522>

¹⁸ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar121522>

¹⁹ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>

²⁰ <https://telegra dot ph/Tezisy-vystupleniya-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-na-rasshirennom-zasedanii-Kollegii-Ministerstva-oborony-12-21>; https://t.me/mod_russia/22809

²¹ <https://t.me/lentachold/56361>; <http://publication dot>

<pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202212200054?index=0&rangeSize=1>

-
- ²² <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-10>;
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-9>
- ²³ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-20>
- ²⁴ <https://www.mk dot ru/amp/politics/2020/03/17/putin-otvetil-na-kritiku-ruchnoy-oppozicii-napominaniem-ob-opyte-devyanostykh.html>
- ²⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-7>;
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-25>
- ²⁶ <https://telegra dot ph/Tezisy-vystupleniya-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-na-rasshirenom-zasedanii-Kollegii-Ministerstva-oborony-12-21>; https://t.me/mod_russia/22809; <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>
- ²⁷ <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>
- ²⁸ <https://telegra dot ph/Tezisy-vystupleniya-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-na-rasshirenom-zasedanii-Kollegii-Ministerstva-oborony-12-21>; https://t.me/mod_russia/22809; <http://kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70159>
- ²⁹ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-6>;
<https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Offensive%20Campaign%20Assessment%2C%20December%20%20PDF.pdf>
- ³⁰ <https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/21/politics/zelensky-biden-washington-visit-ukraine-russia-war/index.html>;
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-64047058>; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/12/21/mr-zelensky-goes-washington-trip-packed-with-symbolism/>
- ³¹ <https://t.me/vysokygovorit/10327>; <https://topwar dot ru/206792-neopredelennoe-budushee-i-izvestnye-riski-sluhi-o-postavke-zrk-patriot-na-ukrainu.html>; <https://t.me/m0sc0wcalling/16575>; https://t.me/channel_elmurid/2437
- ³² <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-10>;
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-august-2>
- ³³ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI>
- ³⁴ https://t.me/boris_rozhin/73245
- ³⁵ <https://t.me/wargonzo/9919>
- ³⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI>
- ³⁷ https://twitter.com/serhey_hayday/status/1605235714714738688
- ³⁸ <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/43871>; <https://t.me/milinfoive/94659>
- ³⁹ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/7560>
- ⁴⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0QDjsQPGyUeopn3rg2iV8yFFiBivUBVyBaoe2im21PrvA4WPbg63AxsjUZSQvLrI>
- ⁴¹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI>
- ⁴² <https://t.me/wargonzo/9919>
- ⁴³ https://t.me/robert_magyar/269
- ⁴⁴ https://t.me/robert_magyar/269
- ⁴⁵ <https://smi.pp dot ua/news/kyiv/1461814-n-a.html>; <https://glavred dot net/ukraine/vsu-polnostyu-osvobodili-bahmut-voennye-10434860.html>

⁴⁶ <https://t.me/strelkovii/3583>

⁴⁷ <https://t.me/readovkanews/49338> ; https://t.me/boris_rozhin/73260 ; <https://t.me/epoddubny/14269>

⁴⁸ <https://t.me/wargonzo/9919>

⁴⁹

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI>

⁵⁰ <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/43862>

⁵¹ <https://t.me/wargonzo/9919> ; <https://t.me/epoddubny/14260> ; <https://t.me/strelkovii/3583>

⁵² <https://t.me/wargonzo/9919> ; <https://t.me/strelkovii/3583>

⁵³

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI>

⁵⁴

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI> ;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0QDjsQPGyUeopn3rg2iV8yFFiBivUBVyBaoe2im21PrvA4WPbg63AxsjUZSQvLrl>

⁵⁵

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0QDjsQPGyUeopn3rg2iV8yFFiBivUBVyBaoe2im21PrvA4WPbg63AxsjUZSQvLrl>;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI>; <https://t.me/wargonzo/9919>

⁵⁶ https://armyinform.com_dot_ua/2022/12/21/okupanty-probuvaly-vstanovyty-kontrol-nad-ostrovamy-v-delti-dnipra-ale-otrymaly-gidnu-vidsich/

⁵⁷ https://armyinform.com_dot_ua/2022/12/21/stovidsotkovyh-oznak-togo-shho-vorog-maye-namir-vidstupaty-narazi-ne-prostezhuyetsya/; [%20https://www%20dot%20ukrinform.ru/rubric-ato/3636805-v-vsu-scitaut-informacionnoj-lovuskoy-zaavlenia-rossian-ob-othode-s-levobereza-hersonsiny.html">https://t.me/stranaua/81635;%20https://www%20dot%20ukrinform.ru/rubric-ato/3636805-v-vsu-scitaut-informacionnoj-lovuskoy-zaavlenia-rossian-ob-othode-s-levobereza-hersonsiny.html](https://t.me/stranaua/81635)

⁵⁸ <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-19>; https://suspilne_dot_media/341234-povernenna-svitla-rosiani-ne-vipuskaut-z-okupovanih-teritorij-putin-zustrinetsa-z-lukaskom-299-den-vijni-onlajn/

⁵⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI>

⁶⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0QDjsQPGyUeopn3rg2iV8yFFiBivUBVyBaoe2im21PrvA4WPbg63AxsjUZSQvLrl>

⁶¹ <https://t.me/hueviyherson/31397>; <https://t.me/stranaua/81650>

⁶² <https://twitter.com/Tatarigami-UA/status/1605250206106537985>

⁶³ <https://twitter.com/Tatarigami-UA/status/1605250201312264193>

⁶⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid02TMuETDGtqAmWbPWCGmanwyk9Nc43Rq4niEiMAcn6MSpoUWTxUuVJ81c2N4Z8Q5UBI>

⁶⁵ <https://t.me/epoddubny/14272>

⁶⁶ <https://t.me/voenkorKotenok/43869%20>; https://t.me/boris_rozhin/73256

⁶⁷ <https://www.radiosvoboda.org/a/news-magate-moskva-vizyt-zaes/32187146.html>; https://tass_dot_com/defense/1553597; https://t.me/miroshnik_r/9960

⁶⁸ <https://t.me/spravdi/22810>

⁶⁹ <https://t.me/spravdi/22810>

⁷⁰ <https://t.me/rybar/42192>

-
- ⁷¹ <https://telegra dot ph/Tezisy-vystupleniya-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-na-rasshirennom-zasedanii-Kollegii-Ministerstva-oborony-12-21>; https://t.me/mod_russia/22809
- ⁷² <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-july-17>; <https://telegra dot ph/Tezisy-vystupleniya-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-na-rasshirennom-zasedanii-Kollegii-Ministerstva-oborony-12-21>; https://t.me/mod_russia/22809
- ⁷³ <https://telegra dot ph/Tezisy-vystupleniya-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-na-rasshirennom-zasedanii-Kollegii-Ministerstva-oborony-12-21>; https://t.me/mod_russia/22809
- ⁷⁴ <https://telegra dot ph/Tezisy-vystupleniya-Ministra-oborony-Rossijskoj-Federacii-na-rasshirennom-zasedanii-Kollegii-Ministerstva-oborony-12-21>; https://t.me/mod_russia/22809
- ⁷⁵ <https://t.me/sotaproject/51195>
- ⁷⁶ <https://t.me/sotaproject/51195>
- ⁷⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/navalny-says-mercenary-boss-visited-his-jail-recruit-ukraine-campaign-2022-12-21/>; <https://twitter.com/navalny/status/1605526513721524224?s=20&t=81PYYZcBYcBeJ9e1DyeQSg>
- ⁷⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/navalny-says-mercenary-boss-visited-his-jail-recruit-ukraine-campaign-2022-12-21/>; <https://twitter.com/navalny/status/1605526519404560385?s=20&t=81PYYZcBYcBeJ9e1DyeQSg>; <https://twitter.com/navalny/status/1605526517437501444?s=20&t=81PYYZcBYcBeJ9e1DyeQSg>
- ⁷⁹ https://t.me/concordgroup_official/190
- ⁸⁰ <https://twitter.com/Danspiun/status/1605327851737481217>; <https://twitter.com/wartranslated/status/1604882364269731840>; <https://wartranslated.com/russian-volunteer-murz-on-why-russia-is-not-ready-to-defend-ukrainian-winter-offensive/>
- ⁸¹ <https://gur dot gov dot ua/content/to-nash-tank-banul-2-raza-vystrelyl-y-20-patsanov-nakh-i-tvary-svoykh-zhe-ubyvaiut-nakh-i.html>
- ⁸² <https://baikal-journal dot ru/2022/12/19/putin-govoril-chto-mobilizovannyh-na-peredovuyu-nikto-ne-kinet/>; <https://notes.citeam.org/mobilization-dec-19-20>
- ⁸³ <https://baikal-journal dot ru/2022/12/19/putin-govoril-chto-mobilizovannyh-na-peredovuyu-nikto-ne-kinet/>; <https://notes.citeam.org/mobilization-dec-19-20>
- ⁸⁴ <https://t.me/astrapress/17849>
- ⁸⁵ https://t.me/ostorozhno_moskva/2908
- ⁸⁶ https://t.me/ostorozhno_moskva/2908
- ⁸⁷ <https://sprotyv dot mod dot gov.ua/2022/12/21/okupanty-zminyly-svoje-zakonodavstvo-zadlya-borotby-z-pidpillyam/>
- ⁸⁸ <https://sprotyv dot mod dot gov.ua/2022/12/21/okupanty-zminyly-svoje-zakonodavstvo-zadlya-borotby-z-pidpillyam/>
- ⁸⁹ <https://sprotyv dot mod.gov.ua/2022/12/21/okupanty-zminyly-svoje-zakonodavstvo-zadlya-borotby-z-pidpillyam/>
- ⁹⁰ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/7556>
- ⁹¹ <https://t.me/vrogov/6646>
- ⁹² <https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0QDjsQPGyUeopn3rg2iV8yFFiBivUBVyBaoe2im21PrvA4WPbg63AxsjUZSQvLrI>
- ⁹³ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/7557>
- ⁹⁴ <https://t.me/luhanskaVTSA/7557>
- ⁹⁵ <https://sprotyv dot mod.gov.ua/2022/12/20/v-gorlivczy-rosiyan-obladnaly-morg-na-bazi-odnogo-z-promyslovyh-pidpryyemstv/>
- ⁹⁶ <https://sprotyv dot mod.gov.ua/2022/12/20/v-gorlivczy-rosiyan-obladnaly-morg-na-bazi-odnogo-z-promyslovyh-pidpryyemstv/>
- ⁹⁷ <https://sprotyv dot mod.gov.ua/2022/12/21/rosiyan-obladnaly-psyhlikarnyu-na-terytoriyi-zahoplenoyi-bazy-vidpochynku/>
- ⁹⁸ <https://sprotyv dot mod.gov.ua/2022/12/21/rosiyan-obladnaly-psyhlikarnyu-na-terytoriyi-zahoplenoyi-bazy-vidpochynku/>
- ⁹⁹ <https://t.me/BalitskyEV/616>