

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 29

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December 29, 5:30pm 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 forces conducted another massive series of missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure on December 29. Ukrainian officials reported that Russian forces launched 69 cruise missiles and 23 drones at Ukraine and that Ukrainian air defenses shot down 54 of the missiles and at least 11 of the drones.¹ Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces struck targets, primarily infrastructure facilities, in Lviv, Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, and Donetsk oblasts causing widespread disruptions to energy, heating, and water supplies.² Russian sources claimed that Russian forces also struck targets in Sumy, Chernihiv, Zhytomyr, Vinnytsia, Khmelnytsky, Ternopil, Ivano-Frankivsk, Poltava, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts.³ The Belarusian Ministry of Defense claimed that Belarusian air defenses shot down a Ukrainian S-300 air defense missile during the wave of Russian strikes and that wreckage fell onto Belarusian territory.⁴ It is currently unclear whether Ukrainian air defenses may have been responding to Russian missile launches from Belarusian territory, which Russian forces have used repeatedly in support of their campaign against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.⁵

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) responded to ongoing Western assessments that it has severely depleted its stock of high-precision weapons systems amidst the massive strike against Ukraine by stating that it would never run out of Kalibr missiles.⁶ ISW has previously assessed that Russian forces have significantly depleted their arsenal of high-precision weapons systems but will likely continue to threaten Ukrainian critical infrastructure at scale in the near term and cause substantial suffering to Ukrainian civilians.⁷ Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated on December 26 that Russian forces had enough missiles to conduct two or three more large-scale strikes.⁸ ISW assesses that the Russian campaign to break the Ukrainian will to fight through large-scale missile strikes against critical infrastructure will fail even if the Russians are able to conduct more barrages than Budanov estimated.⁹

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated on December 29 Russia's unwillingness to commit to genuine negotiations and to recognize Ukraine as an independent actor in negotiations. Lavrov stated in an interview with a prominent Russian news source that Russia will not accept Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's proposed peace plan and that the Kremlin will not talk to any Ukrainian negotiators under conditions that include the withdrawal of Russian troops from occupied Ukraine, Russian payment of reparations, and Russian participation in international tribunals.¹⁰ Lavrov declared that he cannot determine whether an "adequate," independent politician remains in Kyiv with whom Russia can negotiate.¹¹ Lavrov claimed that Zelensky's refusal to pursue negotiations with Russia in April demonstrated the complete "lack of independence of [Zelensky] in making important decisions" and the manipulation of the West to continue hostilities.¹² Lavrov questioned whether an "acceptable" politician would emerge under the "Kyiv regime," apparently restating the Kremlin's position that Zelensky is not a legitimate political leader or acceptable negotiating partner and recommitting Russia to its maximalist goal to drive regime change in Ukraine.¹³

Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated that fighting in Ukraine is in a deadlock on December 29.¹⁴ In an interview with *BBC*, Budanov stated that “the situation is just stuck” and that both Russian and Ukrainian troops lack the resources or ability to move forward.¹⁵ Budanov stressed that Ukraine cannot defeat Russian troops “in all directions comprehensively” and reiterated that Ukraine is awaiting the supply of new and more advanced weapons systems.¹⁶ Budanov’s statement is consistent with certain elements of ISW’s December 28 assessment, which suggested that the Russian offensive around Bakhmut may be culminating and that Russian forces in this area will likely be unable to make operationally significant gains.¹⁷ However, ISW also noted indicators that Russian forces may be preparing for a decisive effort (likely of a defensive nature) in Luhansk Oblast, which suggests that fighting writ large in Ukraine has not necessarily reached a stalemate.¹⁸

The Kremlin continues to manipulate Russian law to grant the state increasingly broad powers using vague language in order to eliminate dissent and threaten Ukrainian sympathizers. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a supplement to the Russian Criminal Code on December 29 that allows Russian authorities to sentence Russians to up to life imprisonment for “assistance to subversive activities” or for “undergoing training for the purpose of carrying out sabotage activities” and for “organizing a sabotage community” and between 5- and 10-years imprisonment for “participation in such a community.”¹⁹ Putin also signed a law enabling Russian authorities to sentence any private citizen who “desecrates” the ribbon of Saint George (a prominent Russian military symbol especially associated with the war in Ukraine) with up to 3 years imprisonment or a fine of up to three million rubles (40,541 USD).²⁰ These laws follow a sequence of Russian policies targeting what remains of the Russian opposition and enhancing Kremlin control of Russia’s already-limited information space under the guise of preventing Russians from “discrediting” the military.²¹

Repeated Ukrainian strikes on legitimate military targets far in the Russian rear demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Russian air defenses against drones. Ukrainian forces attacked Engels Airbase with an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) on December 29, within three days of reports that air defense shot down a Ukrainian UAV over Engels and killed three Russian servicemen.²² The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on December 29 that it is “increasingly clear” that Russia “is struggling to counter air threats deep inside [its territory].”²³ The United Kingdom MoD assessed that Russian air defenses probably are struggling to meet the high demand for air defense for field headquarters near the front line in Ukraine while also protecting strategic sites, such as Engels Airbase.²⁴ **The repeated strikes on Engels Airbase will likely exacerbate milblogger critiques that Russia cannot defend its own territory from Ukrainian strikes.** A prominent Russian milblogger questioned how Ukrainian UAVs and missiles cross such distances and enter Russian territory with “such impunity” and questioned the honesty of the Russian Ministry of Defense’s response.²⁵ The milblogger joked that an undetected pilot landing in Red Square (referencing Matias Rust’s 1987 flight from Helsinki to Moscow) would certainly generate a response longer than a single sentence from the Russian government.²⁶ ISW reported on similar dissatisfaction among Russian milbloggers on December 26.²⁷

Key Takeaways

- **Russian forces conducted another massive series of missile strikes against Ukrainian critical infrastructure.**

- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Russia's unwillingness to commit to genuine negotiations with Ukraine.**
- **Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kyrylo Budanov stated that fighting in Ukraine is in a deadlock.**
- **The Kremlin continues to manipulate Russian law to grant the state increasingly broad powers under ambiguous conditions in order to eliminate dissent.**
- **Repeated Ukrainian strikes on legitimate military targets in rear areas in the Russian Federation demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Russian air defenses against drones and exacerbate critiques that Russia cannot defend its own territory.**
- **Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Kreminna while Russian forces conducted limited counterattacks along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka area as well as around Bakhmut, where the potential culmination of the Russian offensive is likely being expedited.**
- **Russian forces continued to conduct defensive operations in Kherson Oblast.**
- **The Kremlin's mobilization working group met for the first time on December 29. The forum for criticism of mobilization implementation will likely create friction with the Russian Ministry of Defense.**
- **Russian occupation authorities continue to intensify law enforcement crackdowns in unsuccessful attempts to stamp out partisan pressure in occupied territories.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 29, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

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

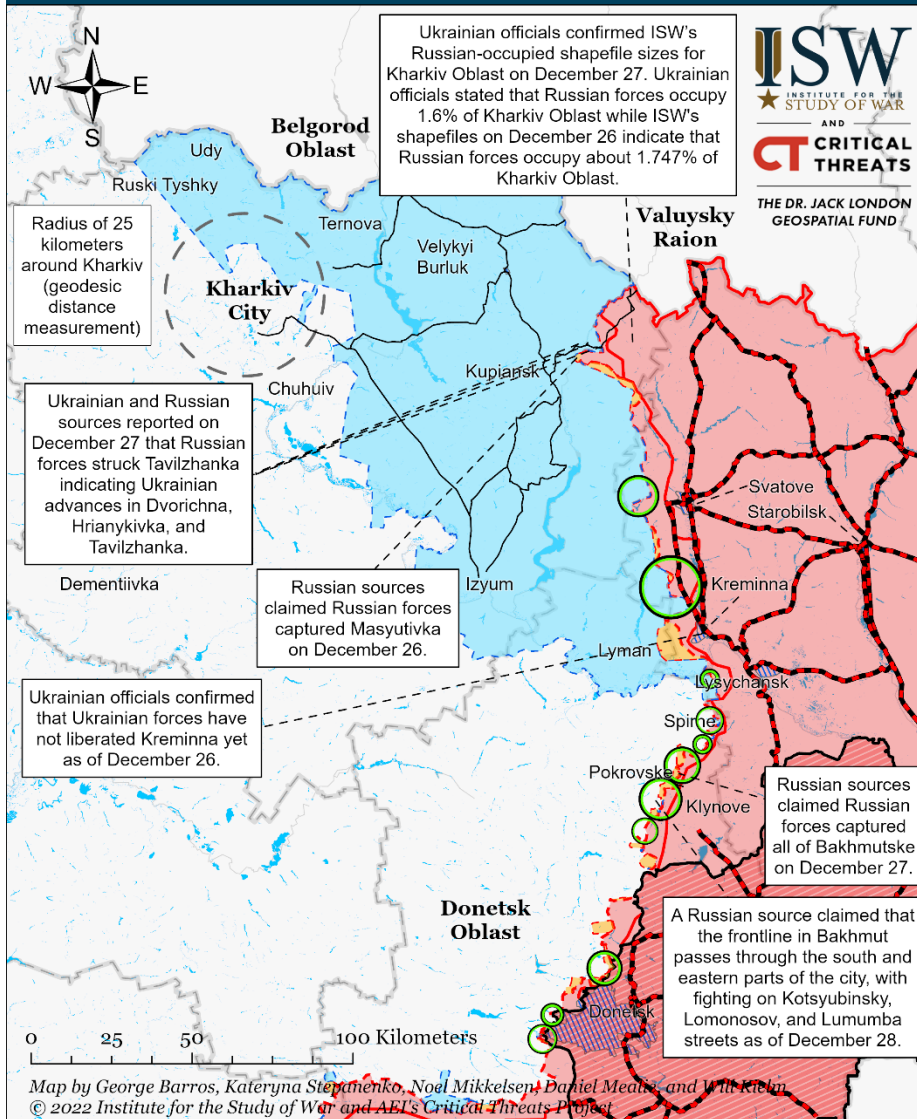
Ukrainian Counteroffensives (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

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

Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations near Kreminna on December 29. Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, reported that Ukrainian forces have advanced 2.5km in the direction of Kreminna over the past week and are continuing offensive actions towards the settlement.²⁸ Hromov stated that information is circulating among officers of the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) 2nd Army Corps that a significant part of the 2nd Army Corps will surrender if Ukrainian forces break through the Svatove-Kreminna line.²⁹ Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated that Ukrainian forces may capture Kreminna by the beginning of 2023.³⁰ A Russian milblogger claimed that 1,500 Ukrainian servicemen are currently trying to break through Russian positions near Kreminna from the direction of Torske (14km west of Kreminna), Dibrova (5km southwest of Kreminna), and Kuzmyne (3km southwest of Kreminna).³¹

Russian forces continued to conduct limited counterattacks to regain lost positions along the Svatove-Kreminna line on December 29. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults northwest of Svatove near Stelmakhivka (16km northwest of Svatove) and Andriivka (16km west of Svatove) and northwest of Kreminna near Ploshchanka (17km northwest of Kreminna) and Chervonopopivka (6km north of Kreminna).³² A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups are probing Ukrainian positions in the vicinity of Hryhorivka (11km south of Kreminna).³³ Haidai reported that Russian forces are continuing to transfer more equipment and personnel to the Kreminna area, including a substantial number of Wagner Group personnel.³⁴ ISW assesses that Russian forces are likely preparing for a decisive effort in Luhansk Oblast, although it is still unclear whether this decisive effort is offensive or defensive.³⁵

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of December 29, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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- 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.

Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

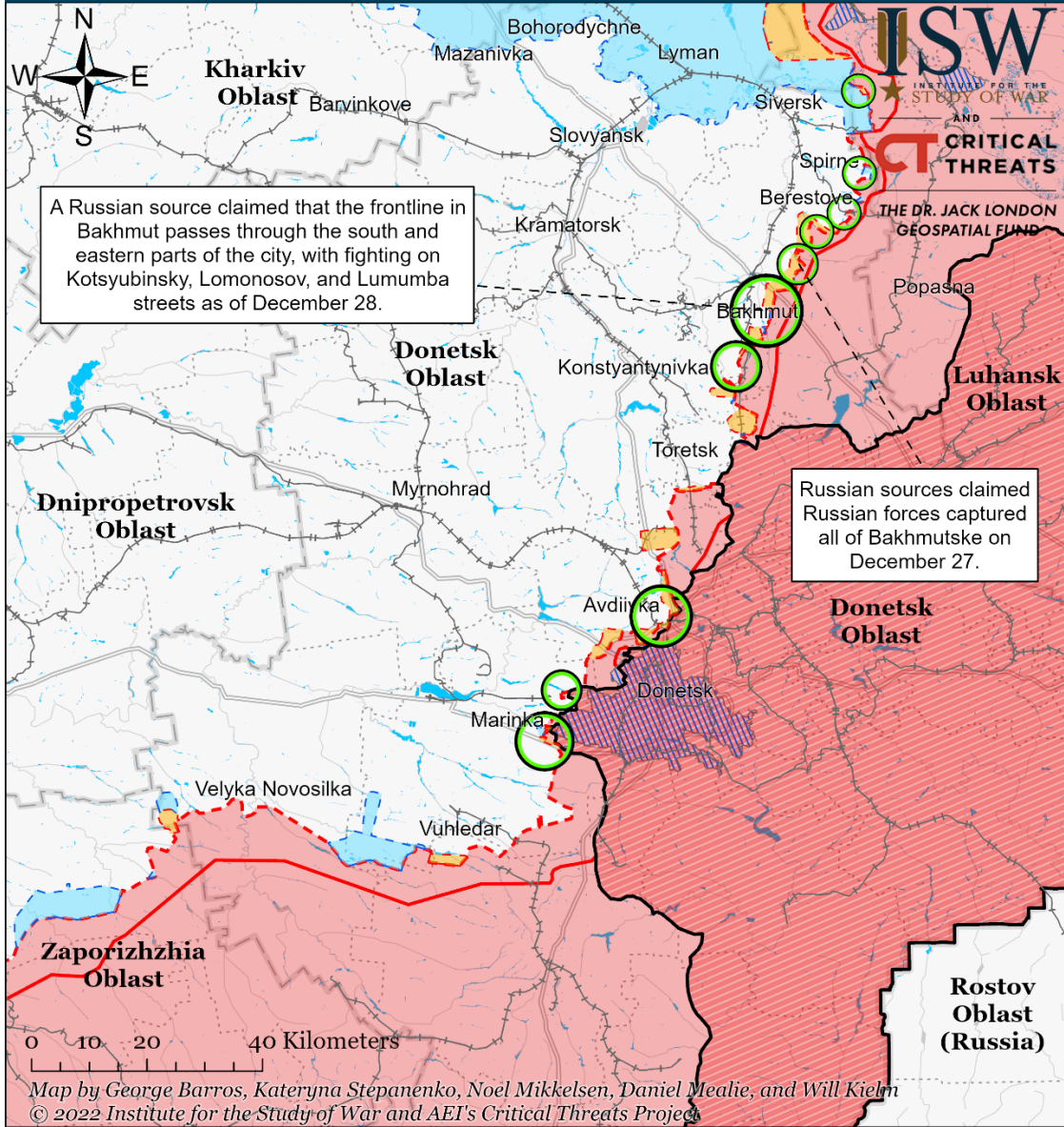
Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on December 29. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut; within 21km northeast of Bakhmut near Bilohorivka, Soledar, Bakhmutske, and Pidhorodne; and within 13km south of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Kurdyumivka.³⁶ Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces withdrew from unspecified strongholds in Soledar and in Pidhorodne, where elements of the Wagner Group are attempting to cut off a section of the M-03 highway.³⁷ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces made notable advances in the southern parts of Bakhmut, although ISW cannot independently verify whether Russian forces have actually done so.³⁸ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces also conducted assaults south of Bakhmut near Opytne.³⁹

The rate of potential culmination of the Russian offensive on Bakhmut is likely being expedited by increased demands on already degraded personnel and equipment. Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, reported that Ukrainian forces repel up to 20 Russian assaults in the Bakhmut area daily.⁴⁰ Hromov also reported that Russian forces concentrated 40 percent of their artillery fire along the 200km long frontline that runs from Kupyansk, Kharkiv Oblast to Marinka, Donetsk Oblast on Bakhmut.⁴¹ Hromov reported that Russian forces deliberately reduced indirect fire in Kherson and Zaporizhia oblasts in recent weeks and delivered artillery rounds to the Bakhmut area to maintain the pace of artillery fire there.⁴² ISW assesses that Russian personnel and equipment capacities in the Bakhmut area are severely degraded and that the Russian offensive to capture Bakhmut is likely culminating as a result.⁴³ Russian forces’ high demand on personnel and on artillery munitions to support a continued high pace of assaults will likely further degrade Russian forces’ operational capabilities in the Bakhmut area and quicken the rate of the Russian offensive’s culmination.

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on December 29. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Avdiivka and within 32km southwest of Avdiivka near Krasnohorivka, Marinka, and Pobieda.⁴⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are using defensive positions in high-rise buildings to establish strong points and adjust artillery fire in Marinka and suggested that this is allowing Ukrainian forces to slow the rate of Russian advances in the settlement.⁴⁵ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued routine indirect fire along the line of contact in Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.⁴⁶

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of December 29, 2022, 3:00 PM ET



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

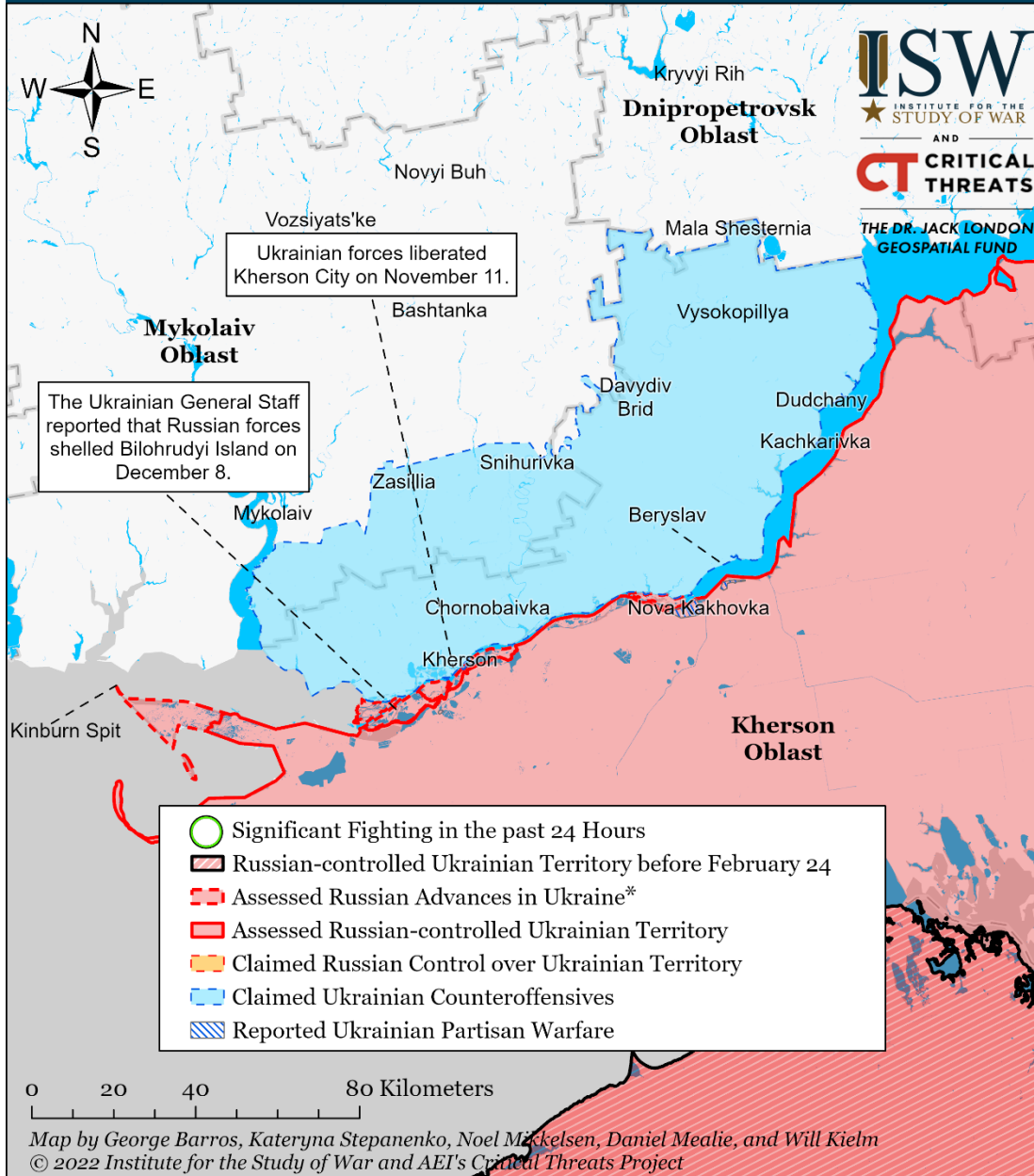
Supporting Effort—Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Russian forces continued defensive operations in Kherson Oblast on December 29. The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces in the Kherson direction are regrouping, reinforcing, and conducting positional defenses.⁴⁷ The Head of the Ukrainian Joint Press Center of the Tavris Direction Defense Forces, Yevhen Yerin, stated that small Russian sabotage and reconnaissance groups try to cross the Dnipro River on a daily basis and that Ukrainian forces are detecting and neutralizing the groups.⁴⁸ Deputy Chief of the Main Operational Directorate of the Ukrainian General Staff, Brigadier General Oleksiy Hromov, noted that mobilized Russian forces are deploying to Kherson Oblast so that conventional combat units can withdraw to the rear and presumably refit for further redeployment.⁴⁹ Hromov also stated that Russian forces are deploying "territorial troops" to the Kherson Oblast frontline to assist with the redeployment effort.⁵⁰ Russian forces continued routine shelling of the west (right) bank of Kherson Oblast and struck the Kherson Oblast Cardiology Dispensary in Kherson City.⁵¹ Residents of Oleshky (just south of Kherson City on the east bank of the Dnipro River) reported shelling in the settlement on both December 28 and 29, and the Ukrainian General Staff and other Ukrainian sources claimed that Russian forces shelled Oleshky.⁵² Russian sources accused Ukrainian troops of striking Oleshky.⁵³ ISW has not observed any visual confirmation of Ukrainian forces in Oleshky, and it is unclear why Russian troops would shell territory they control. Geolocated footage from December 28 shows a Ukrainian drone striking a Russian ammunition truck near Oleshky, indicating that Ukrainian forces have recently targeted Russian positions in Oleshky.⁵⁴

Ukrainian officials provided conflicting reports regarding the situation in Zaporizhia Oblast on December 29. Hromov reported that there is currently no significant threat of the creation of a Russian offensive group in the Zaporizhia direction, which is consistent with previous observations made by Ukrainian officials that Russian units that are currently forming in the Zaporizhia direction do not have offensive capabilities.⁵⁵ However, following Hromov's statement, the Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces are concentrating their efforts on conducting offensive actions in the Zaporizhia direction, which is an inflection in the language the General Staff typically uses that describes Russian actions in this area as defensive.⁵⁶ ISW has not observed any indicators that Russian forces are preparing for or conducting offensive operations in Zaporizhia Oblast.⁵⁷ The reason for the discrepancies between the General Staff and Hromov's statements is unclear.

Ukrainian forces continue to strike Russian concentration areas in Zaporizhia Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian strikes hit various Russian military assets and personnel concentrations in Tokmak, Tytove, Chernihivka, Polohy, and Berdyansk on December 27.⁵⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian personnel concentration in Berdyansk on December 28.⁵⁹

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 29, 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 Dniester 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 Konkva River.

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

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu held the first meeting of the Kremlin's mobilization working group on December 29.⁶⁰ First Vice-Speaker of the Russian Federation Council Andrey Turchak reportedly serves as head of the working group, which enables representatives from both Russian houses of parliament, all major Russian political parties, leading war correspondents and milbloggers, and leaders of unspecified public organizations to discuss mobilization policies with MoD representatives.⁶¹ The Kremlin likely hopes to use the working group to minimize criticism of authorities' mishandlings of mobilization. Turchak claimed that the Russian MoD is "ready" to work in conjunction with other actors.⁶² However, public acknowledgment of and a forum for discussion of MoD mistakes will likely become a further source of friction for the MoD. Shoigu alleged on December 29 that Russian officials had already managed to solve almost all mobilization problems quite quickly but conceded that mobilized soldiers' needs require "constant long-term attention" and coordination between authorities of all levels.⁶³ A Russian milblogger incorrectly stated on December 27, and ISW therefore incorrectly reported, that the working group would meet on December 28.⁶⁴

Russian authorities continue efforts to punish mobilized soldiers who refuse to fight and to publicize threats to mobilization dodgers. Russian news sources reported on December 27 and 28 that three Russian parliamentary deputies have proposed or are drafting bills to limit the rights of men who fled Russia since February 24, particularly while eligible for mobilization. The proposals include confiscation of property, restriction of the right to work in public service, and formal designation as "foreign agents."⁶⁵ Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev posted on December 28 that Russia should ban the "traitors" who left the country since February 24 from returning to Russia.⁶⁶ A group of wives of mobilized soldiers from Volgograd filed a complaint with the military prosecutor's office on December 26 that Russian commanders are holding 9 mobilized soldiers who refuse to fight in a "prison for refuseniks" in Amvrosiivka, Donetsk Oblast.⁶⁷

Russian authorities continue to invest in long-term Russian force generation capacity and long-term financial promises to soldiers contingent on the retention of territory currently occupied by Russia. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed an order on December 23 to establish military training centers in 16 Russian universities across Russia.⁶⁸ The head of Russian-occupied Crimea, Sergei Aksyonov, claimed on December 29 that his administration approved the provision of land plots from occupied Crimea to certain soldiers fighting in Ukraine.

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 occupation authorities are continuing to face partisan pressure in occupied territories. Kherson Oblast Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan reported on December 29 that likely Ukrainian partisans blew up the Nova Kakhovka occupation police department head Yehor Kuzakov.⁶⁹ Khlan noted that he is awaiting additional information and official confirmation of the incident.

Russian occupation authorities are continuing to intensify law enforcement crackdowns in occupied areas in response to Ukrainian partisan activities. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 29 that Russian occupation authorities carried out another search raid for Ukrainian partisans in Tokmak, Zaporizhia Oblast.⁷⁰ The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported on December 29 that Russian occupation officials are seeking to arrest as many saboteurs as possible and are exaggerating their successes in order to give favorable reports to Russian officials in Moscow.⁷¹ A Russian source claimed on December 29 that the Federal Security Service (FSB) detained a Ukrainian resident in occupied-Kherson Oblast under accusations that he was transmitting information to Ukraine's Security Service (SBU) on the movements of Russian forces.⁷²

Russian occupation authorities are facing pressure from farmers in occupied territories.⁷³ A Russian source claimed on December 29 that Ukrainian farmers in occupied Kherson Oblast face a lack of geocadastre (territorial land management) bodies and unprepared irrigation systems that are preventing them from resuming agricultural activities throughout Kherson Oblast.⁷⁴ The Russian source claimed on December 29 that Ukrainian farmers are requesting that Kherson Occupation Administration Head Vladimir Saldo urgently address threats to the upcoming agricultural season as Russian occupation authorities have failed to provide the promised support to Ukrainian farmers.⁷⁵

Russian occupation authorities are continuing to seize and repurpose civilian infrastructure in occupied territories for military use. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 29 that Russian forces are concentrating troops and military equipment in abandoned schools in occupied territories.⁷⁶ The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported on December 29 that Russian forces are using the basements of schools along the frontlines in the Vasylivskyi Raion, Zaporizhia Oblast, to deliberately stage provocations and create propaganda.⁷⁷ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 29 that Russian forces are continuing to use civilian healthcare networks in occupied territories to treat wounded servicemen and private military mercenaries.⁷⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 29 that Russian forces seized a hospital in Bilovodsk, Luhansk Oblast, to treat more than 100 wounded Russian and Wagner servicemen and that Russian forces have placed approximately 120 wounded servicemen at a civilian hospital in Tokmak, Zaporizhia Oblast.⁷⁹ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported on December 29 that Russian forces have redirected medical workers and equipment from Kalinin Donetsk Regional Hospital to Mariupol.⁸⁰

Russian officials continued efforts to consolidate administrative and economic control of occupied territories on December 29. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an order on December 29 establishing Russian-appointed prosecutors in occupied Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia Oblasts.⁸¹ The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 29 that Russian occupation authorities are incentivizing Ukrainian citizens to accept Russian passports in exchange for social payments.⁸² Kherson Occupation Administration Head Vladimir Saldo stated on December 29 that external management of enterprises in occupied territories is irrelevant as all enterprises are now state-owned.⁸³ Saldo also stated on December 29 that managers of now state-owned enterprises will only continue their employment if they fulfill obligations set by occupation officials.⁸⁴ Saldo stated that approximately 26,000 enterprises are registered in Kherson Oblast and that Russian officials are working to re-register them within the Russian legal framework.⁸⁵

ISW will continue to report daily observed indicators consistent with the current assessed most dangerous course of action (MDCOA): a renewed invasion of northern Ukraine possibly aimed at Kyiv.

ISW's December 15 MDCOA warning forecast about a potential Russian offensive against northern Ukraine in winter 2023 remains a worst-case scenario within the forecast cone. ISW currently assesses the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus as low, but possible, and the risk of Belarusian direct involvement as very low. This new section in the daily update is not in itself a forecast or assessment. It lays out the daily observed indicators we are using to refine our assessments and forecasts, which we expect to update regularly. Our assessment that the MDCOA remains unlikely has not changed. We will update this header if the assessment changes.

Observed indicators for the MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- Ukrainian General Staff Deputy Chief Oleksiy Hromov stated on December 29 that the Russian military plans to transform the Machulishchy airfield in Belarus into a key Russian “logistics hub” and that unspecified work is ongoing at the Belarusian Machulishchy, Baranovichi, Luninets airfields, and their adjacent infrastructure to support Russian forces.⁸⁶ This indicator can support the MDCOA as well as the Kremlin’s longstanding campaign to establish a permanent Russian military presence in Belarus.⁸⁷

Observed ambiguous indicators for MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) posted a video on December 29 showing unspecified Russian Western Military District elements (possibly of the 2nd Motorized Rifle Division, 1st Guards Tank Army) conducting tactical training with Belarusian personnel at an unspecified training ground in Belarus.⁸⁸ The Russian MoD reiterated that Russian and Belarusian units form a combined Regional Grouping of Forces within the Union State.⁸⁹
- Geolocated video footage posted on December 28 shows a train with Russian military equipment, including tanks and trucks, moving west from the Krasny Bereg railway station in Gomel Oblast.⁹⁰
- Ukrainian General Staff Deputy Chief Oleksiy Hromov stated on December 29 that the Russian military has 11,000 personnel and 400 pieces of equipment currently deployed in Belarus.⁹¹ Hromov stated that 22,000 Russian personnel are currently deployed in Belarus, Bryansk, and Kursk oblasts and that this is half as many personnel (45,500) as Russia deployed to this area before the February 24 invasion. Hromov stated that even if all Belarusian combat forces join Russia, Russia would have only about 30,000 personnel. This is an ambiguous indicator because Russian forces do not need to replicate the February 2022 force array to conduct a diversionary attack against northern Ukraine. Russian commanders might also believe, likely mistakenly, that a smaller force could succeed this winter where a larger one failed in 2022.

Observed counter-indicators for the MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- Ukrainian General Staff Deputy Chief Oleksiy Hromov stated on December 29 that Russia removed all the artillery shells and MLRS ammunition that Russia established in Belarus before the February 24 invasion and that Belarus has limited capabilities to resupply a Russian offensive group with ammunition.⁹²
- The Ukrainian General Staff reiterated that it has not observed Russian forces in Belarus forming a strike group as of December 29.⁹³

- Deputy Ukrainian Defense Minister Hanna Malyar stated on December 29 that persistent reports about a possible Russian invasion from Belarus are part of a Russian information operation to demoralize Ukrainians.⁹⁴
- Ukraine's Main Military Intelligence Directorate Chief Kyrylo Budanov said on December 29 that Russian activity in Belarus is part of an information operation to divert Ukrainian forces away from Ukraine's south and east.⁹⁵ Budanov also stated that he has not observed Russian forces preparing to invade Kyiv City or northern Ukraine.⁹⁶
- Head of Ukraine's State Border Guards Service Serhiy Deyneko stated on December 28 that Russian and Belarusian forces do not have real capacities to attack Ukraine and that Ukrainian authorities have not observed Russian forces in Belarus forming a strike group. He also stated that Belarus' 10,000 combat personnel are not capable of attacking Ukraine.⁹⁷

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://suspilne dot media/348422-ponad-120-raket-vipustila-rosia-po-ukraini-29-grudna-so-vidomo/> ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vogMwWMLBOU&ab_channel=%D0%92%D1%96%D0%B9%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%B5%D1%82%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B5%D0%B1%D0%B0%D1%87%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8F%D0%A3%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%97%D0%BD%D0%B8 ;

<https://www.facebook.com/GeneralStaff.ua/posts/pfbid0qFapCEkyiySrantffNPyjbmGWZbmcMv2kse4L6oArxCrSKAAwks9cwshRJ6M5ATrI>

² https://t.me/pavlokyrylenko_donoda/6087 ; <https://www.facebook.com/prokuraturakharkiv/posts/pfbid0YRMXJbBb2dyRYuq1PeUugZhTjtbM9HDrDkHjFWwgPukhcvmpKrU8MWF3ZrsZs7uGI> ; <https://t.me/hueviyherson/31946> ; <https://t.me/odeskaODA/1044> ; <https://t.me/OleksiyKuleba/3176> ; https://t.me/vitaliy_klitschko/1722 ; https://t.me/andrii_nebytov/924 ;

https://t.me/kozytskyi_maksym_official/6232 ; <https://t.me/andriysadovyi/1225> ;

³ <https://t.me/rybar/42344> ; <https://t.me/vrogov/6817> ; <https://t.me/vrogov/6813> ; <https://t.me/rybar/42352> ; <https://t.me/milchronicles/1440> ; <https://t.me/readovkanews/49840>

⁴ <https://t.me/modmilby/21334>

⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-11>

⁶ https://t.me/mod_russia/23017

⁷ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar120222> ; <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-november-26> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar112222>

⁸ <https://www.liga dot net/ua/politics/interview/kirill-budanov-letom-2023-go-ya-sovetuyu-poehat-v-otpusk-v-krym>

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