Indicators and Thresholds for Russian Military Operations in Ukraine and/or Belarus

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Updates to this document since the previous publication on December 11, 1:00 pm are highlighted

Russia is setting conditions to conduct military operations against Ukraine and/or in Belarus in the coming weeks or months. The Russian Federation has positioned military forces around Ukraine’s border and near the border with Belarus able to initiate offensive operations on very short notice with very little warning. Russian officials and media outlets have been setting conditions in the information space to support such operations. This document is not intended as a forecast or an assessment of the likelihood of any such Russian activities, all of which are also consistent with Russian non-military lines of effort against Ukraine, Belarus, the US, and NATO.

Possible Russian military actions:
1) Overt deployment of Russian conventional military forces into Belarus on the pretext of defending against planned NATO aggression.
2) Overt deployment of Russian conventional military forces into the Donbas region of Ukraine ostensibly to preempt and prevent a Ukrainian attack on the region.
3) Invasion of Ukraine beyond occupied Donbas and Crimea with scenarios ranging from limited incursions (possible) to a full-scale mechanized drive on Kyiv (unlikely).

These activities can be mutually reinforcing and are in no way mutually exclusive.
- Russian forces and information operations are postured to support overt deployments into both Donbas and Belarus simultaneously.
- They could conduct those operations and also drive into unoccupied Ukraine simultaneously, although they would likely require more reinforcements on the Ukrainian border than have yet been observed.
- They could alternatively first deploy into Donbas and Belarus and then invade unoccupied Ukraine as a subsequent phase.

ISW has been forecasting since October 2020 that Russia would deploy its own ground forces into Belarus at some point. We have not forecasted that Russia would deploy its own troops into Donbas, but such a development would not be inconsistent with the general trend of our assessments. We have consistently held that an invasion of unoccupied Ukraine is highly unlikely and would not occur without a major change in the situation and a visible Russian information campaign to set conditions for such an action. We stand by that assessment.

**This document is not a forecast or an assessment.** It lays out the indicators we are using to refine our assessments and forecasts, noting which ones have tripped, which have partially tripped, and which have not tripped. It then presents the dominant narrative from the Kremlin for each day starting on November 22, followed by a run-down of key activities by Ukraine and other states.
This is an interim document, which we expect to update regularly. We present this interim assessment and forecast, along with indicators, to help frame ongoing discussions about Russian actions. This is not a finished analytical product.

Military-Political Indicators

Tripped:
1. An increase of Russian command and control (C2) elements inside Donbas or in southern or western Russia near the Russian-Ukrainian border. – Likely tripped, inferred from 8th Combined Arms Army (CAA) announcement of command post exercise in Donbas, and Ukrainian claims of increased Russian logistics support activities in Donbas throughout November 2021.¹ Ukrainian military intelligence additionally reported on December 14 that Russian officers began meeting with units commanders in Russia’s proxy 1st and 2nd Corps in Donbas.²
2. Decreased bandwidth on Russian railways for commercial enterprises since October.³ – The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) is likely moving lots of hardware.
3. Mobilization of the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) militias. – Likely tripped given DNR/LNR reserves reportedly mobilized under 8th CAA leadership on November 22.⁴
4. Mobilization of artillery elements at the regiment and brigade level. – Arguably tripped with the Russian acknowledgement of significant mobilizations in the Southern Military District on December 1. The Kremlin confirmed military mobilizations in Opuk, Crimea; many artillery elements of the 58th CAA are likely still located in Opuk after the April 2021 buildup.

Partially Tripped:
1. Increased volume of video recordings capturing Russian hardware moving in western Russia towards Ukraine. – We have observed an increase in video volume in November. Threshold: We still have not seen the same quantity of video as we saw in April, but we are steadily approaching that point.
2. The Kremlin issues some form of political ultimatum to Kyiv or calls Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in for senior talks. – Arguably tripped by notable Kremlin-aligned think tank scholar Fyodor Lukyanov’s November 24 article in which he almost says that if NATO does not give Russian President Vladimir Putin a solid promise that Ukraine won’t join NATO, there will be war similar to the Russia-Georgian war of 2008.⁵ There is still no formal Kremlin statement of an ultimatum or a call for Zelensky talks.
3. More Russian deployments, mobilizations, or snap exercises at scale (maneuver elements at the brigade, regiment, and/or multiple battalion tactical group level from the 1st Tank Army, and the 20th, 8th, and 41st CAAs).
   1. 20th CAA – Not tripped yet. We may not see this occur in the open source (OSINT) if/when it occurs. Approximately 700 snipers, likely of the 20th CAA, began conducting reconnaissance and sniper exercises near the Ukrainian border on December 2.⁶ These exercises do not constitute mobilization at scale but are a significant indicator given the Kremlin’s past effective use of Russian snipers in trench warfare in Donbas.
   2. 1st Tank Army – Likely tripped. The 1st Tank Army is likely establishing an assembly area in Voronezh, Russia. Russian authorities on December 11 issued a Notice to Airman (NOTAM) covering the Pogonovo Training Ground in Voronezh from December 16-22.⁷ The Russian Ministry of Defense stated on December 9 that unspecified tank units (approximately 200 personnel) of the Western Military
District conducted live fire training with battalion-sized artillery elements at the Pogonovo and Krintsa training grounds in Voronezh. Russian social media users observed approximately two battalions of T-80 and T-72 tanks in Maslovka, Voronezh, on December 8-11, and also observed Buk air defense systems likely of the 49th Air Defense Brigade of the 1st Tank Army at railheads in Voronezh on December 8. Social media users observed T-80s, likely of the 4th Tank Division and equipment of the 2nd Tank Division, in Maslovka, Voronezh, in mid-November. The likely deployment of elements of two divisions and air defense units of the 1st Tank Army indicates significant elements of the army deploying to Voronezh. The deployment of the 1st Tank Army to Voronezh, as opposed to Belarus, indicates that the most dangerous course of action (MDCOA) of a mechanized drive to Kyiv from Belarus is less likely.

3. 8th CAA – Tripped with the DNR and LNR reserve mobilization on November 22 and announcement of large Southern Military District exercises on December 1.

4. 41st CAA – Likely partially tripped. Independent OSINT observers claim they observed more trucks of the 41st CAA deploy via rail from Siberia towards Yelnya on December 1. Previously observed elements of the 41st CAA are still at Yelnya as of December 1. The Russian Ministry of Defense additionally announced it formed a new Tank Support Fighting Vehicle (BMPT) company—possibly at Yelnya—on December 1.

4. Mobilization of Russia’s Black Sea naval elements. – Partially tripped as of December 7. Two large landing ships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet loaded naval infantry for amphibious assault exercises at the Opuk Training Ground in Crimea on December 7. The Caesar Kunikov and Novocherkassk large landing ships of the Black Sea fleet onboarded an unspecified number of naval infantry at an unspecified location for future exercises at Opuk on an unspecified future date. More than 500 marines of the Russian Black Sea Fleet began conducting exercises at unspecified Crimean training grounds on December 3. This mobilization does not constitute mobilization at scale but is significant as Black Sea Fleet naval infantry’s first public battalion-sized mobilization since the crisis began in October 2021. Black Sea Fleet naval aviation held an exercise of only 10 crews of Su-27 and Su-30 on November 24. Missile ship Shuya of the Black Sea Fleet conducted an exercise on November 26 in response to the announcement of the USS Arleigh Burke’s deployment to the Black Sea. The Black Sea Fleet’s S-400 air defense units stationed in Crimea conducted readiness exercises on December 15.

Not Tripped:

1. Mobilization of Russia’s Airborne Forces (VDV) – We may not see this occur in the open source if/when it occurs.

2. Mobilization of Caspian Sea Fleet elements in the Black Sea near Ukraine. – We may not see this occur in the open source if/when it occurs. Caspian Sea Fleet elements may still be in the Black Sea left over from the April 2021 buildup. Over 300 naval infantry of the Caspian Flotilla conducted exercises with Southern Military District (SMD) air support at the Adanak Training Ground in Dagestan on December 7. These exercises do not trip this indicator but are significant as the Caspian Flotilla naval infantry’s first battalion-sized exercises since the crisis began in October 2021.

3. Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA): The Kremlin escalates the migrant crisis in Belarus. The Kremlin would likely do so in order to set conditions for deployment of Russian ground forces into Belarus.

4. MDCOA: Kremlin deploys ground forces to Belarus. – Not tripped yet.

5. MDCOA: Activations/mobilization/heightened readiness of the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces (nuclear weapons). – We will very likely not see this in the open source if it occurs,
but it would be an indicator that an operation is imminent or already underway. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has made public statements suggesting that the SRF are at heightened alert, however.\(^\text{22}\)

### Information Domain Indicators

**Tripped:**

1. The Kremlin publicly defines red lines. – *Tripped on December 1 when Putin stated he insists on “legal guarantees” that NATO will not expand further eastward towards Russia and called for formal negotiations with the US.*\(^\text{23}\) Partially tripped when Putin defined NATO deployments of “shock weapon systems” to Ukraine as one Kremlin “red line” on November 30.

2. Belarus claims NATO is building up military forces near Belarus. – *The Belarusian MoD accused Poland of forming a “shock group” near Belarus on November 11 and accused Lithuania and Latvia of building their own groups on November 23.*\(^\text{24}\) Threshold: Russian media has not been emphasizing this information operation yet. If the Kremlin media bolsters it, then a Russian deployment to Belarus and the MDCOA is more likely.

3. Russian claims that weapon shipments to Ukraine destabilize the situation. – *Tripped on November 22.*\(^\text{25}\) Russian MFA spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed on December 15 that the presence of 10,000 NATO servicemen in Ukraine impedes the implementation of the Minsk Agreements.\(^\text{26}\)

4. Kremlin warns about a “repeat of Srebrenica.” – *Tripped on December 10.* Putin said that the situation in Donbas resembles a genocide on December 9. Putin stated that “Russophobia is the first step towards genocide,” and that current events in Donbas are “very reminiscent of a genocide.”\(^\text{27}\) The head of Russia Today’s Russia and FSU desk resurfaced the Srebrenica meme on November 23.\(^\text{28}\) The last time the Kremlin prominently mentioned the Srebrenica meme was in December 2019, when Putin warned that a lack of amnesty for DNR and LNR fighters would result in a second Srebrenica.\(^\text{29}\) News anchors on primetime Kremlin-run TV claimed on December 13 that Ukraine is carrying out a “genocide against the Russian nation.”\(^\text{30}\)

5. Intensified Kremlin information operations claiming NATO is deploying forces into Ukraine or creating "NATO bases" inside Ukraine. – *Tripped on December 15.* Russian MFA spokesperson Zakharova claimed on December 15 that NATO has 10,000 servicemen in Ukraine, including 4,000 Americans.\(^\text{31}\)

**Partially Tripped:**

1. MDCOA: Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko requests Russian ground forces in Belarus. – *Partially tripped on November 29 with Lukashenko’s statement that Belarus will support Russia during any military escalation in Donbas. Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced a joint military exercise with Russia on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border on an unspecified future date. Khrenin additionally announced Belarusian forces will begin major exercises on December 1.*\(^\text{32}\)

2. Russian claims that Kyiv has de facto wholesale abandoned the Minsk Agreements and Russia must therefore act to protect Donbas. – *Overall not tripped, but some memes that buttress this have been circulating.*

   1. Russian claims that “Zelensky cannot be reasoned with” or “Zelensky is abandoning the Minsk Agreements.” – *Partially tripped for a long time.* Threshold: This meme has been on medium-low burner since spring 2020 after Zelensky rejected the Kremlin’s call to implement the Steinmeier formula – one of the Kremlin’s preferred interpretations of the Minsk Agreements. This would move to fully tripped if there
is an invigorated Kremlin media push around a centralized narrative that “Kyiv has completely disregarded the Minsk Agreements.” This push has not occurred, and this narrative has not left the backburner.

2. Russian claims that “Germany and France are de facto allowing Kyiv to get away with ignoring the Minsk Agreements.” – *Tripped on November 21.*

3. Sustained or intensified Kremlin information operations claiming Ukraine is attacking or preparing to attack Donbas. – *Overall, not tripped, but the Kremlin has increased its information operations supporting this narrative throughout December.*
   1. Kremlin claims Ukraine is attacking civilians. – Not tripped yet.
   2. Kremlin claims Ukraine is amassing forces near Donbas. – *Tripped on December 1.*
   3. Kremlin claims Ukraine is attacking “ethnic Russians” or “Russian citizens.” – *Partially tripped as of November 29 when Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said Russia will continue its humanitarian assistance for “Russian citizens” in Donbas.* The Kremlin also admitted a first batch of 100 Russian passport holders in Donbas to join Putin’s ruling United Russia Party on November 30. This development could support a Russian information operation about Ukrainian attacks against “Russian citizens in Donbas.” The Kremlin has not yet claimed Ukraine is attacking ethnic Russians or Russian citizens in Donbas as of November 30.
   4. Kremlin claims Ukrainian forces are using TB2 drones or Javelins against civilians in Donbas. – Not tripped as of December 15.
   5. Kremlin claims Ukraine is violating the demilitarized zones in Zolote, Stanitsa Luhanska, and Petrivske. – *Partially tripped as of November 28. The LNR People’s Militia claimed that Ukrainian Army forces entered the disengagement zone in Zolote, Luhansk, on November 28. The LNR claimed that it observed two soldiers of Ukraine’s 24th Mechanized Brigade inside former Ukrainian-held positions in the frontline village of Zolote.* Thresholds for this indicator include separatist claims of Ukrainian violations of the two other Petrivske and Stanitsa Luhanska demilitarized zones (not tripped yet), and large scale violations, such as full battalion deployments to Zolote, Petrivske, and Stanitsa Luhanska. Russian proxy claims that two soldiers were observed in the Zolote demilitarized zone occupies a low place on the threshold scale for this narrative.

**Not Tripped:**

1. The Kremlin/Russian media stops denying a buildup around Ukraine – *Not tripped yet.*
2. Kremlin claims that actual or likely humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine necessitates overt Russian intervention. – *Not tripped yet.*
3. Kremlin claims that Russians who oppose direct action in Ukraine are “Western agents” or victims of Western propaganda. – *Not tripped yet.*
4. Senior Kremlin officials and Russian media pundits increasingly discuss the conditions under which Russian intervention in Ukraine is necessary, acceptable, or desirable. – *Not tripped yet.*
5. Senior Kremlin officials openly advocating for overt intervention in Ukraine. – *Not tripped yet.*
6. A fear campaign warning of an impending humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine targeting ethnic Russians or Russian citizens outside occupied Donbas. – *Not tripped yet.*
7. Official statements that Russia is “prepared to intervene if necessary” to prevent humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine or secure Russian interest vis-à-vis NATO. – *Not tripped yet.*
8. Russian media entities supporting these narratives with a high volume of messaging in a centrally directed manner to create a propaganda echo chamber in Russia’s domestic information space. – *Not tripped yet.*
9. MDCOA: A concerted Russian information operation to demoralize the Ukrainian population ahead of a likely Russian offensive against Ukraine. – *Not tripped yet.*
   1. Overt threats that Russia would intend to capture Kyiv, Kharkiv, Mariupol, and other significant Ukrainian cities. – *Not tripped yet.*
   2. The high costs that war with Russia would entail for Ukraine. – *Not tripped yet.*
   3. The inevitability of decisive Russian Victory in such a war. – *Not tripped yet.*
   4. The West will not support Ukraine in such a war. – *Not tripped yet.*
   5. Political capitulation to the Kremlin would preempt the war. – *Not tripped yet.*
   6. Ukraine is not really a sovereign state is controlled by the West. – *Not tripped yet.*

10. MDCOA: Titushki (paid provocateurs) actions in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Mariupol, Sumy, or other significant Ukrainian cities. – *Not tripped yet.*

Kremlin Narratives / Memes of the Day

**December 15**
- Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused the United States and NATO of aggravating the situation in Ukraine by supplying Kyiv with weaponry and training on December 15.46 Zakharova said that the presence of 10,000 NATO servicemen in Ukraine – 4,000 of which are American – does not help create conditions for the implementation of the Minsk agreements. The Kremlin is escalating its narrative that western support for Ukraine is preventing Kyiv from implementing the Minsk Agreements.

**December 13**
- Anchors on primetime Russian state TV claim a “genocide against the Russian nation” is occurring in Ukraine on December 13.47 Kremlin media is increasingly claiming that Ukraine is carrying out a “genocide” against ethnic Russians in Ukraine. The Kremlin could leverage these false claims as a justification for overt military deployments in Donbas or military action against Ukraine.

**December 10**
- Kremlin-sponsored media misquoted Former Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin that the West mistrusts Ukraine—likely to push the narrative of Western abandonment of Ukraine—on December 10.48 Klimkin said that the West does not know if Ukraine has a concrete national security plan, causing uncertainty among Western partners. Russian media misconstrued Klimkin’s statements to imply that the West does not trust an unstable Ukrainian government. The Kremlin is advancing a narrative that the West will not defend Ukraine in the case of a military confrontation due to Ukrainian domestic concerns.

- A known Russian information operations asset in Ukraine suggested on December 10 that Ukraine and the West will conduct a joint military provocation against Russia in 2022.49 Former pro-Russian Ukrainian Member of Parliament Ilya Kiva said a joint military provocation between Ukraine and the West against Russia would allow the West to block Nord Stream 2.50 Kiva is a known Russian asset who has participated in information campaigns designed to undermine faith in the Ukrainian government and provoke violent protests in Ukraine.51

**December 9**
- Putin said that the situation in Donbas resembles a genocide on December 9. Putin stated that “Russophobia is the first step towards genocide,” and that current events in Donbas are “very reminiscent of a genocide.”52 This is a significant Kremlin rhetorical inflection and is the first time Kremlin leadership has framed events in Ukraine as a genocide since the crisis began in October 2021. This likely marked the beginning of a new Kremlin information
operation to support Russian efforts to justify future Russian military activities in Ukraine. The Kremlin and its media apparatuses have not yet wholesale pushed the “genocide” meme as of December 11.

- **Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov threatened Ukraine on December 9 that Russia will suppress any Ukrainian “provocations” in Donbas.** Gerasimov said, “any provocations of the Ukrainian authorities to resolve the problems of Donbas by force will be suppressed.” The Kremlin has not yet fully accused Ukraine of deciding to use force in Donbas as of December 11.

- **Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov accused NATO of increasing its military presence in Greece to contain Russia on December 8.** Peskov said that NATO and US forces are shipping weapons through the Port of Alexandroupolis and concentrating in Greece to create new NATO bases to contain Russia.

- **Russian Southern Military District (SMD) Commander Alexander Dvornikov said that NATO’s military buildup near Russian borders is among the SMD’s main security threats on December 9.** Dvornikov also included the possibility of an escalation in Ukraine, Nagorno-Karabakh, and the ongoing war in Syria among the SMD’s main priorities.

- **Kremlin and proxy republic narratives about alleged Ukrainian weapon deployments closer to Donbas began unifying around December 9.** Zakharova reiterated the Kremlin accusation that Ukraine is deploying heavy equipment and artillery to Donbas on December 9. The LNR militia accused Ukraine’s armed forces of deploying four BTR-80 armored personnel carriers near the outskirts of Voitovo Village, Luhansk, and seven BTR-80s to Raygorodokon, Luhansk, on December 9.

- **Zakharova said on December 9 that negotiations with Ukraine for a peaceful settlement have “reached an impasse.”** Zakharova said the regular Trilateral Contract Group meeting held on December 7 and 8 ended in vain. The Kremlin is likely setting information conditions to claim that Ukraine has wholesale abandoned the Minsk Agreements.

- **Russian Permanent Representative to the Organization for Security Cooperation Europe (OSCE) Alexander Lukashevich alleged that Ukraine is militarizing in violation of the Minsk Agreements on December 9.** Lukashevich said that Ukraine is outfitting its forces in Donbas with Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones. Lukashevich also accused Turkey, the United States, Germany, the European Union, and France of supporting Kyiv’s militarization efforts by providing weapons, financing weapons purchases, or participating in international military exercises.

**December 8**

- **Zakharova said Russia issued a protest note to the US embassy in Moscow on December 8 in response to US jets “endangering civil aircraft” in the Black Sea on December 3.** Zakharova denounced NATO’s expansion to Russian borders and its threat to international passenger airways.

**December 7**

- **Kremlin-sponsored media coordinated a response to US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland’s Senate testimony on December 7.** Peskov
denied that Russia seeks to restore the Soviet Union. Kremlin media manipulated Nuland’s discussion of Russian military expansion to imply that the Russian army has “significant superiority” over Ukraine. The Kremlin notably did not release a coordinated narrative regarding US President Joe Biden and Putin’s videoconference immediately following their call on December 7.

- **Russian news agency TASS published an article on December 7 claiming that Zelensky may strip Donbas residents of their Ukrainian citizenship.** The article speculated that a potential Ukrainian policy change on dual citizenship regulations that Zelensky discussed on December 1 could enable Zelensky to deprive Donbas residents of opportunities to obtain Ukrainian citizenship.

- **Russian media falsely claimed the OSCE observed Ukraine deploying tanks and howitzers to Donbas on December 7.** The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine observed 30 Ukrainian tanks and 17 Ukrainian howitzers at two railway stations in Ukrainian government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk on December 6. The OSCE stated this hardware was in compliance with withdrawal lines.

**December 6**

- **Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) Deputy Secretary General Valeriy Semerikov** said NATO’s provocations are unnoticed by international organizations in an interview on December 6. Semerikov stated that NATO, “under a far-fetched pretext,” is expanding military infrastructure and deployments in Eastern Europe. Semerikov added that NATO exercises near CSTO member states increased in other regions.

**December 5**

- **Kremlin-sponsored media accused Ukrainian Armed Forces of deploying 17 tanks and two armored personnel carriers to three Ukrainian government—controlled settlements in eastern Ukraine on December 5.** Russian media only specified that Ukraine deployed the T-64 tanks to Artyomivske, Donetsk Oblast. Russian media also claimed that Ukraine deployed the 20th Electronic Warfare Battalion to Ukrainian government—controlled eastern Ukraine to suppress Organization for Security and Cooperation Europe (OSCE) unmanned aerial monitoring in Zolote, Novoivanovka, and Orekhovo, Luhansk Oblast, on December 4. The OSCE did not report any Ukrainian deployments in the region on December 4-5.

- **Zakharova accused NATO of endangering civilian aircraft over the Black Sea on December 5.** Russia’s Federal Air Transport Agency claimed that a Russian airline Aeroflot flight from Tel Aviv to Moscow had to change directions over the Black Sea because of a NATO reconnaissance aircraft on December 3. Zakharova denounced increased NATO activity near Russian borders.

- **Zakharova responded to White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki’s characterization of the Kremlin as a “provocateur” on December 5.** Zakharova chastised Psaki and referenced the United States’ military actions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Vietnam, Belgrade, Baghdad, the depositions of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, and alleged US participation in color revolutions worldwide.

**December 3**

- **Kremlin-sponsored media manipulated Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt’s November 30 interview to falsely suggest that Norway opposes any**
NATO force presence near any Russian border on December 3. Huitfelt said that it is in Norway’s security interests for Norwegian vessels to accompany NATO ships and planes when NATO conducts exercises near Russia’s northern sea border with Norway. Russian media falsely said Norway condemned all NATO operations along Russian borders.

December 2
- **Zakharova decried the NATO foreign ministerial meeting which occurred in Riga on December 2.** Zakharova said on December 2 that the Kremlin has defined Ukraine’s accession to NATO as a long-term “red line.” Zakharova stated that NATO’s increased cooperation with Ukraine is the “de facto beginning of NATO’s assimilation of [Ukraine’s] military infrastructure” to support NATO military operations against Russia. Zakharova reiterated that NATO must halt its eastward expansion to resolve the current situation.

- **Kremlin-sponsored media conducted a coordinated information campaign stating that military action is “highly likely” in Donbas and Crimea following Zelensky’s speech to the Ukrainian Parliament on December 1.** Peskov said that the “Kyiv regime is determined to use all opportunities, including force, to encroach on [Crimea],” on December 2. Peskov stated that the likelihood of Ukrainian military activity in Donbas is “still high.” Kremlin media that targets Western audiences is supporting this meme. A centralized intensified Kremlin information operation claiming Ukraine will attack Donbas or Crimea would indicate that Russian military operations in Donbas are likely imminent. The Kremlin has not elevated this meme to reach that threshold as of December 2.

- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on December 1 that Russia knew about a claimed Ukrainian deployment of 125,000 troops near Donbas for a while.** Lavrov’s December 2 statement buttresses a meme about a claimed Ukrainian deployment of 125,000 troops to Donbas that first appeared in the Russian information space on December 1. Lavrov stated that Ukraine accumulated troops under the guise of seasonal troop rotation. Lavrov accused the West of concealing the Ukrainian troop movements.

December 1
- **Zakharova said that Ukraine undermined the Minsk Agreements by deploying 125,000 troops to Donbas on December 1.** Zakharova stated that NATO states are preparing to send military personnel to Ukraine and claimed that London intends to send 600 British servicemen to the “Ukrainian civil war.” Zakharova said Kyiv is using a bill passed in August to forcefully return Donbas to Ukraine and exit the Minsk Agreements. Zakharova said Western media created mass “hysteria” about a potential Russian invasion in a bid to cover Ukrainian military developments in the east.

November 30
- **The Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) issued a rebuttal to NATO’s statement that NATO poses no threat to Russia on November 30.** The MFA said NATO threatens Russia because the alliance seeks to expand in Russia’s “eastern flank,” is “ uncontrollably” expanding in Europe, and breaches treaties. The MFA said Russia is acting in a “purely defensive nature” against NATO’s purposeful provocations executed via “large-scale” and “unplanned” exercises in the Black Sea. The Kremlin will increase information pressure against NATO in tandem with Russia’s military buildup against Ukraine in winter 2021-2022.

- **Lavrov said the United States “surrounded” Russia with its military bases during a November 30 speech.** Lavrov said Russia observes daily Western troop and equipment deployments near Russia under the guise of being in response to Russian military exercises.
Lavrov said NATO lied for 30 years about not expanding towards Russian borders. Lavrov said that the United States intervenes in other states’ domestic affairs under the guise of “spreading democracy,” refuses international cooperation, and disregards their obligations in the United Nations.

**November 29**
- Kremlin-sponsored media mischaracterized an annual Ukrainian exercise authorization bill to claim Zelensky is violating the Minsk Agreements by allowing foreign troops to participate in training exercises in Ukraine in 2022. Zelensky registered an annually recurring bill to authorize foreign military deployments to Ukraine for training exercises to Ukraine’s Parliament on November 29. Russian media falsely framed Zelensky’s bill as Ukrainian preparations to attack Donbas.

**November 28**
- Peskov accused “Anglo-Saxon media” of driving false “hysteria” about a Russian attack against Ukraine on November 28. Peskov said “this hysteria, which is now being whipped up in the Anglo-Saxon media, in the Ukrainian media and is supported by Ukrainian politicians headed by the head of state—we consider it absolutely unacceptable.” Peskov said that accusations against Russia may be an attempt for Ukraine to conduct a military offensive against Donbas: “...we have already said that this escalation may be an attempt to hide [Ukraine's] own preparations for a military solution to the Donbas problem.”

- The LNR People’s Militia claimed that Ukrainian Army forces entered the disengagement zone in Zolote, Luhansk, on November 28. The LNR claimed that it observed two soldiers of Ukraine’s 24th Mechanized Brigade inside former Ukrainian-held positions in the frontline village of Zolote. Zelensky ordered Ukrainian forces to withdraw from Zolote in November 2019 as part of an experimental disengagement. Ukrainian disengagement from Zolote (and two other frontline positions at Stanitsa Luhanska and Petrivske) was very likely a Kremlin condition for the December 2019 Normandy Format talk in Paris, France. Kremlin and Kremlin proxies have not claimed Ukrainian violations of Stanitsa Luhanska and Petrivske demilitarized zones as of November 28.

**November 27**
- Russian propaganda is increasingly targeting the US and “US propaganda” about a Russian invasion in Ukraine. Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) Director Sergey Naryshkin said on November 27 that the United States is trying to inflame the conflict in Donbas by spreading false propaganda alleging a planned Russian invasion of Ukraine. “The [Americans’] goal is to try to push the poorly-controlled Kyiv authorities to rekindle the conflict...with renewed vigor.” Naryshkin continued to deny any Russian invasion plans. A central Russian information operation is pushing this meme. Naryshkin made this statement on Rossiya 1 (primetime tv news) and mainstream Kremlin outlets (Sputnik, Izvestia, RIA Novosti, TASS, and others) are recirculating it. This is likely the key narrative of the weekend for the Russian domestic information space. Conditioning Russian citizens to perceive all reports of a Russian invasion as being American propaganda is likely a key Kremlin information objective for the weekend of November 27-28.

**November 26**
- Russia’s representative to the OSCE, Alexander Lukashevich, accused Kyiv of conducting a disinformation operation about a Russian offensive to justify NATO’s expansion in Ukraine and near Russian borders on November 26. Lukashevich said Kyiv is spreading falsehoods about Russian aggression to “justify the current
November 25

- Zakharova focused on framing Kyiv as an increasingly belligerent aggressor in Donbas at the MFA briefing on November 25. She said the Ukrainian government is fueling the situation in Donbas and “pushing for military (force) resolution of the conflict inside of Ukraine,” as the Ukrainian government feels it can do so unpunished.96 Zakharova also talked about Ukraine increasingly using prohibited weapon systems in Donbas.

- Lukashevich accused Ukraine of attacking freedom of speech in Ukraine on November 25. Lukashevich cited the recent staff firings at the Kyiv Post and Zelensky’s ban of pro-Russian opposition media outlets in February 2021.97 This meme can support efforts to reinforce the narrative that Kyiv is targeting Russian entities.

November 24

- Shoigu says Russia's nuclear capabilities and armed forces need to maintain combat readiness in light of the increased activity of NATO countries near Russia's borders.98

- Peskov says that Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev’s narrative on November 23 about Ukraine potentially facing a migration crisis was “well-reasoned.”99

- Reserve Colonel Oleg Zhdanov said, “the United States is deliberately escalating tension around the situation on the Russian-Ukrainian border.”100

- Fyodor Lukyanov—a prominent Kremlin foreign policy thinker—published an article in which he almost says that if NATO does not give Putin a solid promise that Ukraine will not join NATO, there will be war similar to the Russia-Georgian war of 2008.101

November 23:

- Peskov said, “the lack of progress in the implementation of the Minsk Agreements is a significant irritant and trigger that leads to the level of tension in Europe as a whole,” on November 23.102

- Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev stated that Ukraine might face a refugee crisis. He blamed the West for de facto establishing a protectorate in Ukraine and destroying Ukraine’s economy, and stated that “any moment the situation [in Ukraine] can explode and millions of refugees will run to seek shelter in other places.”103

- Shoigu stated that the US Global Thunder-22 exercises included ten strategic nuclear bombers postured against Russia.104 The Pentagon responded on November 24 and said, “These missions were announced publicly at the time, and closely planned with [Strategic Command], [European Command], allies, and partners to ensure maximum training and integration opportunities as well as compliance with all national and international requirements and protocols.”
Chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee Andrei Kartapolov announced the risk of a repeat of the Afghan scenario in Ukraine. Kartapolov said “All US efforts to ‘help’ Ukraine are leading it to an abyss.” Kartapolov urged people to recall "how the American adventure in Afghanistan ended.”

November 22:
- The press bureau of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) issued a statement claiming that Washington is spreading false information about Russian preparations for an attack against Ukraine. “The provocative policy of the United States and the European Union, which deliberately strengthens Kyiv’s sense of permissiveness and impunity, is of extreme concern. We observed a similar situation in Georgia on the eve of the 2008 events.”

Updates on Key States’ Activities

Russia

S-400 anti-aircraft missile system crews conducted air defense exercises in Crimea on December 15. Military personnel practiced measures to launch missiles at simulated enemy targets. Su-24M bombers acted as the simulated enemy.

Elements of Russia’s 106th VDV Division conducted training at the Tesnitskoye training ground in the vicinity of Tula on December 15. The servicemen practiced conducting fire missions amidst a hostile air attack using the Strelets intelligence command and control complex. The officers of the 106th tested their servicemen’s ability to independently prioritize targets according to their importance to the mission. The 106th Division is based south of Moscow and could support a Russian VDV deployment into Belarus, which ISW has previously forecasted is highly likely.

Independent Russian polling agency Levada released the results of a poll of Russian public opinion on the Ukraine crisis on December 14. The poll asked several questions about “the recent exacerbation of the situation in eastern Ukraine” and the likelihood of war. Only 4% of respondents believed Russia is responsible, while 50% blamed NATO, 16% Ukraine, and 3% the DNR/LNR. 75% do not exclude the possibility of a Russia/Ukraine war. Of those 75%, 3% think war is inevitable, 36% highly likely, 38% the least likely but possible outcome, and 15% think it is impossible.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova claimed the G7’s joint statement on Russia/Ukraine demonstrated the G7’s inability to take responsibility for its own mistakes on December 12. Zakharova blamed the G7 for meddling in Ukraine’s internal affairs and causing a split in Ukrainian society. She claimed further negotiations must occur between “Ukraine and Ukraine,” not Ukraine and Russia. The Kremlin did not issue any other official response to the joint G7 statement.

Russian military hardware is likely moving in Bryansk and Kursk Oblasts, Russia as of December 12. OSINT Twitter accounts The Lookout, ELINT News, and Kyle Glen reported the movements of Russian military hardware roughly 100km from the Russo-Ukrainian border. These OSINT accounts assessed that these movements occurred between December 7 and December 14 based on the weather. The Lookout assessed that some of the moving hardware in Kursk are likely components of the Russian 138th Motorized Rifle Brigade.
or the 6th Combined Arms Army arriving to the Russo-Ukrainian border. The Russian hardware includes tanks and logistics convoys with fuel tankers.

The 1st Tank Army is likely establishing an assembly area in Voronezh, Russia. Russian authorities on December 11 issued a Notice to Airman (NOTAM) covering the Pogonovo Training Ground in Voronezh from December 16-22. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated on December 9 that unspecified tank units (approximately 200 personnel) of the Western Military District conducted live fire training with battalion-sized artillery elements at the Pogonovo and Krintsa training grounds in Voronezh. Russian social media users observed approximately two battalions of T-80 and T-72 tanks in Maslovka, Voronezh on December 8-11. Social media users observed Buk air defense systems, likely from the 49th Air Defense Brigade of the 1st Tank Army, at railheads in Voronezh on December 8. Social media users observed T-80s, likely of the 4th Tank Division and equipment of the 2nd Tank Division, in Maslovka, Voronezh, in mid-November. The likely deployment of elements of two divisions and air defense units of the 1st Tank Army indicates significant elements of the army deploying to Voronezh. The deployment of the 1st Tank Army to Voronezh, as opposed to Belarus, indicates that the MDCOA of a mechanized drive to Kyiv from Belarus is less likely.

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on December 11 that over 1,500 Southern Military District (SMD) personnel participated in tank fire and maneuver exercises in unspecified training grounds in Crimea, Volgograd, Rostov, Adygea, Dagestan, Ingushetia, North Ossetia, Karachay-Cherkessia, Armenia, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. The MoD claims these exercises occurred over a five-day period. The MoD stated that the SMD will continue combat coordination activity through February 2022.

The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) reiterated its red line demand for legal guarantees that NATO will not expand eastward on December 10. The MFA stated it seeks “serious long-term legal guarantees” that would “exclude NATO’s further advancement to the east and deployment of weapons on Russia’s western borders which are a threat to Russia.” The MFA demanded NATO “officially disavow” the 2008 NATO Bucharest summit decision on Ukraine and Georgia’s potential membership in NATO. The Russian Foreign Ministry said this explicit restatement and clarification was necessary because “numerous loose interpretations of our position have emerged in recent days.” The MFA accused NATO of pushing Ukraine towards aggression as opposed to “reining in” Kyiv. The MFA urged Washington to return to the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty. The MFA announced that the Kremlin is drafting formal guarantees proposals in preparation for the next round of strategic US-Russia talks.

The Ukrainian Navy reported that Russian forces blocked 70 percent of the Sea of Azov on December 10. The Ukrainian Navy claims that the Kremlin issued navigation warnings to restrict movement in large areas of the Sea of Azov in order to prepare for Russian artillery fire against Ukrainian positions near Mariupol, Berdyansk, and Henichesk. Russia has not conducted such artillery attacks as of December 11.

Russia staged a provocation against an old Ukrainian naval transport in the Kerch Strait on December 9. Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) coast guard ships staged a provocation in the Kerch Strait against a 1969 Ukrainian navy transport that was training in the Sea of Azov on December 9. The Ukrainian transport departed Ukraine’s naval base in Mariupol and went south for training. Russian FSB ships demanded the Ukrainian transport not cross the Kerch Strait. The Ukrainian vessel stated it never had
intention to do so and eventually returned to Mariupol without an interception. The Russian Foreign Ministry cited this incident and accused Ukraine of creating “a new provocation.”

The Russian Black Sea Fleet conducted artillery firing exercises from the new patrol ship Sergey Kotov in the Black Sea and from Novorossiysk naval base on December 8. The crew fired AK-176 artillery mount large-caliber naval machine guns and DP-65 anti-sabotage grenade launcher systems.

Company-sized sapper elements (over 200 servicemen) of the Russian Black Sea Fleet conducted engineering support exercises in Crimea on December 8. Servicemen camouflaged berths, supplied vessels with power, and provided bases with drinking water under simulated enemy reconnaissance.

Russia’s Western Military District (WMD) may be building a new base near Ukraine or Belarus. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that unspecified platoon commanders of the WMD began conducting training exercises at the WMD’s 31st Training Ground on December 7. It is unclear where the 31st Training Ground is located or how long it has existed. The Russian Ministry of Defense publicly mentioned the 31st Training Ground for the first time on November 24, 2021, and announced its intent to build 72 buildings and structures on the grounds. The 31st Training Ground could be a new Russian base near Ukraine or Belarus to support Russian military activities in either country, though ISW has no evidence for that hypothesis.

Two large landing ships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet loaded naval infantry for amphibious assault exercises at the Opuk Training Ground in Crimea on December 7. The Caesar Kunikov and Novocherkassk large landing ships of the Black Sea fleet onboarded an unspecified number of naval infantry at an unspecified location for future exercises at Opuk on an unspecified future date.

Over 300 naval infantry of the Caspian Flotilla conducted exercises with Southern Military District (SMD) air support at the Adanak Training Ground in Dagestan on December 7. Caspian Flotilla naval infantry defended a beach from simulated amphibious assault with Mi-28 helicopter air support from the SMD’s 4th Air and Air Defense Army. This was the first roughly battalion-sized Caspian Flotilla naval infantry exercise since the Russian military buildup near Ukraine resumed in October 2021.

Peskov stated that NATO military deployments to Ukraine would “force” Russia to protect its interests on December 6. Peskov condemned the US and NATO for not recognizing Russia’s “red lines” and suggested Russia will act unless the West respects Kremlin red lines.

Over 300 senior officers of the Southern Military District (SMD), including regimental commanders, began training for multi-domain operations with missile and air strikes on December 6. SMD Commander Alexander Dvornikov is presiding over videoconference training with SMD commanders down to the regimental level. The training includes conducting complex multi-domain operations to conduct air and missile strikes in multiple operational directions.

Lavrov said Russia “must force” Ukraine to work within the Minsk Agreements framework on December 5. Lavrov stated that Ukraine will not implement any
agreements on its own. Lavrov added that Berlin and Paris are slacking on their commitments to hold Ukraine accountable under the Normandy Format.\textsuperscript{131}

The Kremlin granted United Russia Party membership to LNR leader Leonid Pasechnik and DNR leader Denis Pushilin on November 30 and December 4, respectively.\textsuperscript{132} The Kremlin will likely use Pushilin and Pasechnik’s now-official position in the Kremlin’s ruling party to advance Russian information operations about protecting “Russian citizens” in Donbas.

More than 500 marines of the Russian Black Sea Fleet began conducting military exercises in unspecified Crimean training grounds on December 3.\textsuperscript{133} Black Sea Fleet naval infantry practiced defending equipment transports and neutralizing enemy reconnaissance groups while deploying to Crimean training grounds. This mobilization does not constitute mobilization at scale but is significant as the Black Sea Fleet naval infantry’s first public battalion-sized mobilization since the crisis began in October 2021.

Over 700 Russian servicemen, likely of the 20th Combined Arms Army, began conducting tactical sniper and reconnaissance exercises in Voronezh, Belgorod, Bryansk, and Smolensk on December 2.\textsuperscript{134} The exercises emphasize reconnaissance, sniper, and counter-sniper tasks. Embedded regular Russian snipers and Russian-trained proxy militia snipers are a leading cause of Ukrainian casualties in Donbas.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced on December 2 that it arrested an alleged Ukrainian Military Intelligence (GUR) operative that Ukrainian officials instructed to conduct a “terrorist attack” with improvised explosive devices on Russian soil.\textsuperscript{135} Intensified Russian information operations about alleged Ukrainian attacks against Russian soil would indicate an effort to set information conditions to support Russian military operations against Ukraine. The Kremlin has not pushed this narrative as of December 3.

Ukraine’s GRU reported on December 3 that Russia’s 8\textsuperscript{th} Combined Arms Army began new operational and combat training exercises and preparations for forward artillery in occupied Donbas on December 1.\textsuperscript{136} The GUR claims these exercises seek to raise the combat readiness of units of the DNR and LNR. The GUR claims that Russian-controlled forces in the DNR and LNR are rotating units to forward positions and preparing indirect fire assets to attack Ukrainian positions. The DNR and LNR have not yet mobilized at scale as of December 3.

Lavrov called on the OSCE Ministerial Council to formulate “long-term, legally binding security guarantees” against NATO expansion on December 2.\textsuperscript{137} Lavrov repeated Putin’s “red lines” from December 1 speech.\textsuperscript{138} Lavrov said that Russia will make concrete proposals soon, counting on Western “serious consideration, in essence and without excuses.” Lavrov demanded that OSCE participate in regulating conflicts, specifically by sending a harsh signal to Kyiv to implement the Minsk Agreements. Lavrov said the Ukrainian crisis cannot be resolved without direct dialogue between Ukraine and the DNR and LNR, and by granting the proxies special status in Ukraine’s constitution. The Kremlin likely seeks to permanently integrate DNR and LNR into Ukraine as Russian-controlled proxies.\textsuperscript{139}

Putin clearly articulated his red lines on halting NATO’s eastern expansion for the first time on December 1. Putin stated he insists on “legal guarantees” that NATO will not expand further eastward towards Russia at a ceremony to present foreign ambassadors their
credentials on December 1. Putin also referenced his previous November 18 session with Lavrov in which Putin claimed the West is not respecting Russian red lines. Putin’s statement was exceptionally clear and unusual; Putin does not normally articulate Russian policy objectives so clearly in open settings. Putin seeks to impose a revisionist world order in which states in Russia’s claimed sphere of influence have truncated sovereignty. The Kremlin may decide to conduct military operations against Ukraine if Western leaders and Zelensky reject these demands.

The Permanent Council of the CSTO expressed “great concern” over NATO’s military activity near Russian borders on December 1. The Kremlin-dominated CSTO accused NATO of violating the 1936 Montreux Convention which forbids the transit of non-Black Sea states’ warships with large military equipment. The CSTO is likely establishing information conditions in former Soviet states about NATO’s disregard of Russian borders to support Putin’s stated red lines.

Lavrov said that Russia will “harshly react” to any maneuvers on Russia’s western borders on December 1. Lavrov encouraged the West to consider Lukashenko’s November 30 statement of his openness to host Russian nuclear missiles as a warning. Lavrov’s statement indicates an increased likelihood of a permanent Russian military deployment to Belarus. Lavrov said NATO’s effort to add Ukraine to its “anti-Russia” orbit “severely complicates” the situation in Donbas. Lavrov accused NATO of supplying Ukraine with weapons illegal under the Minsk Agreements and of collaborating with the US to incite land, air, and sea-based provocations near Russian borders. Lavrov emphasized Russia’s readiness to suppress diplomatic initiatives in the United Nations that are beneficial to the West.

The Russian Ministry of Defense on December 1 acknowledged large military movements in the Southern Military District (SMD) for the first time since the crisis began. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that over 10,000 SMD personnel organized in battalion tactical groups (BTG) began deploying to unspecified training grounds in the SMD for exercises. Multiple BTGs of the Russian 58th CAA and 8th CAA are likely mobilized in Crimea and Rostov, respectively. This is the first time the Kremlin acknowledged large SMD mobilization since the Russian buildup against Ukraine began in October 2021. This acknowledgement is likely intended as a signal to Ukraine and NATO given Putin’s simultaneous articulation of a red lines for the West on NATO expansion on December 1.

The Critical Intelligence Team (CIT) OSINT group claims it spotted more elements of the Russian 41st CAA deploying from Siberia to western Russia on December 1. CIT claims it found video depicting trucks of the Tuva-based 55th Motorized Rifle Brigade deploying westward via rail. CIT argues these deployments are likely to Yelnya where other elements of the 41st CAA are deployed near the border with Belarus.

Putin defined NATO deployments of “shock weapon systems” to Ukraine as one Kremlin “red line” on November 30. Putin said if Ukraine receives cruise and hypersonic missiles, Russia will respond in minutes. Putin stated that “there are repeated threats of new [Ukrainian] military formations” near the LNR and DNR and reiterated Russia’s concern over NATO strategic aviation in the Black Sea. Putin had not previously publicly defined any Kremlin red line in Ukraine. Putin may articulate more red lines as Russia increases military pressure against Ukraine over winter 2021-2022.
The Kremlin officially initiated a first batch of 100 Donbas residents into Putin’s ruling United Russia party on November 30. Putin’s ruling United Russia Party announced on November 2 that Russian passport-holders in the LNR and DNR will be able to join the party. The Kremlin will likely increasingly leverage information operations claiming to defend Russians in Donbas.

Zakharova said Russia will continue its humanitarian assistance for “Russian citizens” in Donbas on November 29. Zakharova accused the European Union (EU) of considering sending military equipment to Ukraine instead of humanitarian aid to Donbas. The Kremlin will likely intensify military shipments to Donbas falsely presented as “humanitarian aid convoys” in winter 2021-2022.

Peskov stated on November 28 that the Kremlin hopes Putin and Biden will have a video conference before the end of 2021. Peskov stated that there is no exact date for such a call.

Military equipment parked in Crimea since April 2021 is on the move to an unknown location as of November 27. Previously visible Russian military equipment at the Opuk Training Ground in Crimea disappeared from satellite monitoring visibility on November 26-27, indicating redeployment elsewhere. Motorized rifle and artillery elements, many from the 58th CAA, deployed to Opuk in April 2021. It is unclear where the equipment is going as of November 29.

The Kremlin’s political objectives for Donbas likely have not changed as of November 26. Zakharova reiterated the Kremlin’s historically consistent political objectives for a settlement in Donbas on November 26. Zakharova stated, “there is no alternative to an exclusively peaceful settlement, a direct dialogue between Kyiv, Donetsk, and Luhansk as parties to the conflict, and a strict sequence of steps, according to which the restoration of control of the Ukrainian authorities over the border with Russia takes the last place after the granting of a special status to Donbas, the implementation of an amnesty, and the lifting of the economic blockade. And holding local elections.” Zakharova said the “main negotiating format” is the Trilateral Contact Group (Kyiv, OSCE, and LNR/DNR), and that the Normandy Format’s purpose is to monitor the implementation of the Minsk Agreements. She also condemned the foreign ministries of Germany and France for “groundlessly” accusing Russia of refusing to participate in the Normandy Format on November 25.

Russia sent a “humanitarian aid” convoy to the DNR on November 25. The convoy arrived in the DNR on November 25 and is Russia’s 104th so-called humanitarian convoy to Donbas to date. Russia’s Emergency Situations Ministry claimed the convoy carried more than 92 tons of medicine and medical equipment; the convoy likely carried weapons and ammunition given documented past Russian weapon shipments to Donbas under the guise of “humanitarian aid convoys.”

Russian authorities increased border security in Voronezh Oblast on November 22. The FSB announced on November 22 that Russian border guards deployed 24-hour border patrols and stricter checkpoints on a 56-kilometer stretch between Boguchar and Kantemirovka in Voronezh Oblast, Russia, on the Russian border with Ukraine. Russia’s 3rd Motorized Rifle Division is based in Boguchar. This increased border security supports Russian efforts to conceal Russian deployments closer to Ukraine in Voronezh.
The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense Main Intelligence Directorate reported on December 14 that Russia’s 1st and 2nd Corps in Donetsk and Luhansk began new training exercises on December 13. The GRU stated Russian Armed Forces commanders oversaw a combat readiness check of motorized, artillery, and tank units from December 6-10. The report stated the 1st and 2nd Corps began high intensity readiness exercises, particularly practicing meetings with unit commanders and specialized training for snipers.

Representatives from the DNR, LNR, South Ossetia, and the Russian government met in Donetsk to discuss prospects for deepened economic integration on December 14. Representatives from the Russian regions of occupied Crimea, Karelia, Volgograd, Penza, and North Ossetia attended the meeting. The DNR, LNR, and Russian Federation signed several cooperation agreements to promote agricultural, industrial, and infrastructure cooperation. The Kremlin seeks to increase economic ties between its proxies and neighboring Russian regions.

DNR leader Pushilin said during a December 5 interview that the DNR may unify with the LNR in the future. Pushilin said the DNR and LNR cannot unify at this time because the unification would allow Ukraine to undermine the Minsk Agreements. Pushilin stated that Ukrainian government-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk are awaiting the “arrival of the Russian world” and implied that DNR seeks to occupy the entire Donetsk Oblast. Pushilin also reiterated Kremlin statements about Ukrainian militarization and deployments to Donbas. Pushilin announced that over 350,000 DNR residents received Russian passports.

United Kingdom

Russian President Vladimir Putin and UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson held a phone call on December 13. The Kremlin readout stated Putin “outlined in detail” his assessments of the current situation around Ukraine in response to Johnson’s concern about the “alleged large-scale movement of Russian troops.” Putin presented “specific examples” of Kyiv’s violation of the Minsk agreements, exacerbation of the situation on the line of contact, and discrimination against the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. Putin announced “the need to immediately begin negotiations in order to develop clear international legal agreements that would exclude any further NATO advance to the east and the deployment of weapons threatening Russia in neighboring states, primarily in Ukraine” and stated the Russian side will present draft relevant documents. London’s readout expressed Johnson’s “deep concern” over the Russian buildup, reiterated the important of working through diplomatic channels, and emphasized the UK’s commitment to Ukraine’s territorial integrity.
and sovereignty. However Johnson also “recognized the importance of dialogue on international and regional security” – a possible concession to the Kremlin’s desire for a new European security agreement – and agreed it is imperative “all sides respect the terms of the Minsk protocol.”

The Group of Seven (G7) foreign ministers met in Liverpool to discuss measures against Russian aggression in Ukraine on December 11. The Ministers discussed Russian aggression against Ukraine and global efforts to “present a united front against malign behavior” by Russia and other actors. The Ministers discussed several non-Ukraine related items including global development, JCPOA negotiations, and ongoing crises in Myanmar in Ethiopia.

The G7 ministers released a joint statement on Russian aggression towards Ukraine on December 12, the day after the meeting. The statement stated:

1. The G7 states are “united in our condemnation of Russia’s military build-up and aggressive rhetoric towards Ukraine.”
2. Called on Russia to de-escalate, pursue diplomatic channels, and maintain transparency of military activities – framing this request as a repeat of those articulated by President Biden during his December 7 call with Putin. The G7 additionally reconfirmed its support for France and Germany in the Normandy Four and called for full implementation of the Minsk agreements.
3. Stated “Russia should be in no doubt that further military aggression against Ukraine would have massive consequences and severe cost in response.”
4. Reaffirmed the G7’s commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity while additionally stating “we commend Ukraine’s posture of restraint.”
5. Stated the G7 will “intensify our cooperation on our common and comprehensive response.”

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss met with Lavrov on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2. Truss restated the UK’s support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and urged the Kremlin to deescalate. Lavrov emphasized that the UK’s provocative rhetoric undermines efforts to restore constructive dialogue on Ukraine.

Truss met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2. The ministers exchanged views on cooperation between Ukraine and the United Kingdom (UK) to strengthen security in the Black Sea region. They agreed on the need to unite European states to prevent the launch of Nord Stream 2.

The UK announced it established a security force assistance brigade and a NATO holding area in Germany on November 25. The brigade has tanks and drone elements. UK Lieutenant General Ralph Wooddisse stated, “we are putting a substantial number of armored vehicles forward in order to be able to move more quickly should they be required anywhere on the continental [European] landmass.” This is a reversal of the UK’s permanent force presence withdrawal from Germany in late 2020.

The UK and Ukraine signed a 1.7-billion pound loan agreement for the development of the Ukrainian navy on November 12. The deal stipulates that the UK
will transfer two decommissioned UK Royal Navy minehunters to Ukraine, jointly produce eight missile ships, deliver and retrofit weapons systems to existing Ukrainian vessels, produce a Ukrainian frigate, and provide technical support for building Ukrainian naval infrastructure.179

United States

Ukrainian Armed Forces Commander-in-Chief Valeriy Zaluzhnyi and US Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley discussed Russian aggression in a phone call on December 15.180 This is the third phone call between Zaluzhnyi and Milley in less than a month to discuss Russian aggression against Ukraine. Zaluzhnyi thanked Milley for the US' continued support for Ukrainian territorial sovereignty and commended the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework established on November 10, 2021 that expanded Ukrainian-US cooperation in Black Sea security, cyber defense, and intelligence sharing, and countering Russia's aggression. Zaluzhnyi stated that American experts have conducted assessment of Ukrainian Air Defense capabilities following Ukrainian Defense Minister Reznikov's visit to the United States.

US Deputy Secretary of State Karen Donfried met Russian Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Ryabkov in Moscow on December 15.181 Ryabkov and Donfried discussed Russia’s demanded security guarantees from the United States and NATO. The Russian MFA only published a one-sentence readout and the US State Department has not published a readout as of 1600 December 15.

The American guided-missile destroyer USS Arleigh Burke exited the Black Sea on December 15.182 The Arleigh Burke conducted exercises with NATO partners in the Black Sea from November 25 – December 14. The Arleigh Burke’s deployment placed NATO anti-air, anti-submarine, and surface-to-surface capabilities in the Black Sea and prompted several false Russian claims of NATO aggression.

US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Kyiv, Ukraine on December 13.183 Donfried stated her agreement with the principle of “no decisions on Ukraine without Ukraine” and reaffirmed the United States’ full support for Ukraine’s territorial integrity and sovereignty. She stated the United States’ readiness to implement comprehensive measures to deter Russia aggression against Ukraine. Kuleba emphasized the need for political and diplomatic approaches to resolving Russian-Ukrainian armed conflict and welcomed American assistance in de-escalatory efforts. The Ukrainian MFA’s readout stated Kuleba suggested unspecified security and humanitarian courses of action Russia could take to effectively implement the Minsk Agreements. No new inflections or theoretical changes emerged from the meeting. Donfried will meet with Russian Deputy FM Ryabkov in Moscow on December 15.

The US strategic RC-135W Rivet Joint Electronic Reconnaissance Aircraft plane conducted a reconnaissance mission near Donbas on December 11.184 This is reportedly the first time the Rivet Joint Electronic Reconnaissance Aircraft has operated inside Ukrainian airspace.185 The Russian Defense Ministry stated it scrambled Su-27 fighters to intercept French and US reconnaissance flights with CL-600 Artemis and RC-135 reconnaissance aircraft over the Black Sea on December 9.186
Biden called the heads of state of the Bucharest Nine (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) to reaffirm US commitments to transatlantic security and NATO’s Article V on December 10. The leaders discussed the need for a NATO defensive stance against growing Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Zelensky and Biden discussed the situation in Ukraine during a December 9 telephone call. Zelensky stressed Ukrainian readiness for extending the peace process in various formats. Biden and Zelensky discussed ways to provide financial, security, and political support to Ukraine in response to Russia’s ongoing aggression. Zelensky emphasized the importance the Nord Stream 2 pipeline plays in deterring Russian aggression.

US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland testified to the US Senate on December 7 that Russia deployed approximately 100 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) near the Ukrainian border. Nuland added that Russia deployed forces near eastern, northern, and southern Ukrainian borders in an interview following her testimony at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Nuland said Russian forces could deploy to Belarus and “mask” themselves to appear as Belarussian forces. Nuland pointed out that Lukashenko’s recognition of Russian occupation of Crimea is “particularly concerning” given his previous leverage against Russian influence.

Biden and Putin held a videoconference about Ukraine on December 7. The Kremlin readout accused Ukraine of attempting to completely dismantle the Minsk Agreements and shirk its commitments from the Normandy Format meetings. Putin stated that NATO seeks to “conquer Ukrainian territory” and deploy military forces near Russian borders. Putin reiterated his demand to obtain “legally fixed guarantees excluding the expansion of NATO in the eastern direction and the deployment of offensive strike weapons systems in the states adjacent to Russia.” The Kremlin readout stated that the presidents agreed to undertake “substantive consultations” on these issues. Biden stated that the US and its allies would respond with “strong economic and other measures” in the event of a military escalation against Ukraine. Biden reiterated his support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and called for de-escalation and a return to diplomacy. Biden spoke with French, German, Italian, and British leaders to brief them on his call with Putin.

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken called Zelensky on December 6. Zelensky and Blinken discussed their respective positions ahead of Biden’s call with Putin on December 7. Zelensky and Blinken agreed on the importance of coordinating sanctions pressure against Russia, restoring Ukraine’s full sovereignty and territorial integrity, and strengthening security cooperation.

US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley participated in a virtual meeting with the NATO Military Committee to discuss “significant security developments across Europe” on December 6.

Blinken and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba discussed implementing deterrence measures against Russia on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2. Blinken and Kuleba discussed the implementation of deterrence measures against Russia including enhanced security and defense cooperation, the preparation of “tough” economic sanctions in the event of intensified Russian aggression, and political and diplomatic pressure against Russia. Blinken reiterated US commitments to
Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity and stressed the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements.198

Blinken and Kuleba discussed implementing deterrence measures against Russia on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2. Blinken and Kuleba discussed the implementation of deterrence measures against Russia including enhanced security and defense cooperation, the preparation of “tough” economic sanctions in the event of intensified Russian aggression, and political and diplomatic pressure against Russia.199 Blinken reiterated US commitments to Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity and stressed the full implementation of the Minsk Agreements.200

Blinken met with Lavrov on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2. Blinken reiterated US calls for Russia to demobilize forces near Ukraine, adhere to the Minsk Agreements, and observe the ceasefire in Donbas. Blinken stated the United States and its allies are prepared to impose “significant costs” against Russia if it escalates militarily.201 Lavrov warned that if the United States continues to ignore Russia’s “concerns,” it will result in “most serious consequences and will force [Russia] to take retaliatory measures to straighten the military-strategic balance.”202 Lavrov restated desire to establish a US-Russia dialogue in accordance with the agreements that Putin and Biden reached at the June 2021 Geneva summit.

US Sixth Fleet announced that the USS Arleigh Burke guided missile destroyer began deploying to the Black Sea “to operate with NATO allies and partners in the region” on November 25.203 Missile ship Shuya of the Black Sea Fleet conducted an exercise in response to the announcement of Arleigh Burke’s deployment.204

Ukraine’s navy received two refurbished former US Coast Guard patrol boats on November 23.205

Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov and US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley had a phone call on November 23. TASS reports that the Russian Ministry of Defense stated they “discussed topical issues of international security.”206 The Joint Chiefs of Staff readout states they discussed “several security-related issues of concern.” The topic was likely Ukraine, given that Milley had a phone call with Commander in Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Valery Zaluzhny on November 22.207

The Biden Administration is reportedly considering sending military advisors and weapons to Ukraine. CNN reported on November 22 that the Biden Administration is considering sending Ukraine US military advisers and weapons (Javelins, stingers, Mi-17 helicopters, and mortars).208

The US imposed new sanctions against the Nord Stream 2 pipeline on November 22. Blinken announced that the State Department submitted to Congress a list with two vessels and one Russia-linked entity involved in the pipeline to be sanctioned.209

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met with Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov in Washington on November 18. The ministers agreed to work closely together to advance the shared priorities outlined in the US-Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework signed on August 31.210 Austin stated interest in deepening cooperation in Black Sea security, cyber defense, and intelligence sharing.
Canada

Reznikov met with Canadian Chief of the Defense Staff Wayne Eyre and called Canadian National Defense Minister Anita Anand on December 3. Eyre met with Reznikov during his official working visit to Kyiv aimed at developing cooperation between Ukraine and Canada’s armed forces. Both parties discussed bilateral defense cooperation in light of Russian security threats.

France and Germany

Ukrainian President Zelensky met both individually and trilaterally with French President Macron and German Chancellor Scholz in Brussels on December 15. Zelensky concentrated on energy issues in his meeting with Scholz, stating Ukraine counts on Germany support to maintain gas transit through Ukraine after the expiration of Ukraine’s current gas deal with Russia on 2024. Kyiv will likely attempt to secure assurances from the new Germany government that the launch of Nord Stream 2 will not deprive Ukraine of lucrative gas transit fees. Zelensky and Macron discussed Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations and the implementation of unspecified joint economic projects. In the trilateral meeting, all parties agreed on the need to continue the Normandy Format, called on Russia to resume constructive work in that format, and seek diplomatic solutions to compel Russia to withdraw its forces from the Ukrainian border.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron held a phone call on December 14. The Kremlin readout stated Putin “outlined in detail” his assessments of the current situation around Ukraine in response to Johnson’s concern about the “alleged large-scale movement of Russian troops.” Putin presented “specific examples” of Kyiv’s violation of the Minsk agreements, exacerbation of the situation on the line of contact, and discrimination against the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. Putin announced “the need to immediately begin negotiations in order to develop clear international legal agreements that would exclude any further NATO advance to the east and the deployment of weapons threatening Russia in neighboring states, primarily in Ukraine” and called on France to participate in these discussions. The Kremlin readout further stated Macron raised the issue of the Belarusian migrant crisis. Putin spoke favorably of direct discussions between the EU and Minsk, drew attention to claimed violations of “international obligations” to help refugees by Poland and the Baltic States, and expressed hope that the migrant issue “will be completely removed from the agenda” in the near future.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held a phone call with new German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock on December 14. Lavrov welcomed Baerbock after her appointment on December 8. Lavrov told Baerbock that Russia needs a security guarantee that NATO will not expand eastward by admitting Ukraine and establish military infrastructure along Russian borders. Lavrov also asked Baerbock to persuade Ukraine to adhere to the Minsk Agreements and participate in the Normandy Format. Baerbock called for “open and honest” dialogue between Russia and Germany and warned Russia would face “massive consequences” in the event of a Russian invasion of unoccupied Ukraine.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Olekseii Reznikov blamed Germany for blocking NATO supplies to Ukraine in an interview with the Financial Times on December 12. Reznikov stated Berlin vetoed Ukraine’s purchase of anti-drone rifles and anti-sniper systems via the NATO Support and Procurement Agency within the last month, but later
relented on the anti-drone rifles after deeming them non-lethal. Reznikov stated “[Germany is] still building the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and at the same time blocking our defensive weapons. It is very unfair.” Reznikov stated Ukraine will seek to purchase equipment bilaterally through the US, UK, Lithuania and France rather than NATO. The Germany economic ministry (responsible for arms sales) and Chancellery declined to comment on the policy, enacted by the government of former Chancellor Angela Merkel. Reznikov stated the strategy of “not provoking Russia” does not and will not work in the future but downplayed the imminent threat. Reznikov stated Kyiv estimates Russia has 100,000 troops near the Ukrainian border, and stated US estimates of 175,000 troops are based on the size of encampments constructed by Russian forces, though many tents remain empty.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock stated NordStream 2 will not be allowed to operate in the event of any new “escalation” in Ukraine on December 12. Baerbock made the statements in an interview with German television station ZDF and said Berlin and Washington agreed on this approach.

French officials issued forceful statements against a Russian offensive in Ukraine in November. Shoigu and Lavrov attended the Russian-French Security Cooperation Council meeting with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Defense Minister Florence Parly in Paris, France, on November 12. The Russian and French ministers reiterated the necessity of compliance with the Minsk Agreements. The ministers discussed nuclear non-proliferation and arms control, prevention of an arms race in outer space, Russia-EU and Russia-NATO relations, and other topics. Le Drian and Parly warned the Kremlin of “serious consequences related to any new harm to Ukraine’s territorial integrity” in a joint French ministers’ statement. Le Drian gave an interview on November 21 in which he reiterated that “Any [Russian] violation of the [Ukrainian] border, any intrusion would lead to extremely grave consequences.”

Germany temporarily suspended Nord Stream 2’s certification on November 16. Germany’s energy regulator suspended the process reportedly because a Swiss-based consortium behind Nord Stream 2 needed to form a German subsidiary company under German law to secure an operating license. The German energy regulator said it would not continue its approval process until the Nord Stream 2 company, which is registered in Switzerland, transfers its main assets and staffing budget to its German subsidiary.

French, German, and Ukrainian foreign ministers had a working meeting in Brussels on November 15. France and Germany issued a joint statement in support of Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity. France and Germany called on Ukraine to implement the Minsk Agreements and expressed regret that Lavrov has refused to meet at the ministerial level for a Normandy Format meeting.

NATO/EU Activity

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg reiterated that Russian aggression against Ukraine or Georgia would “come at a high price” during a meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili at NATO Headquarters in Brussels, Belgium on December 15. Stoltenberg stated NATO’s full support for Georgia’s territorial integrity and called upon Russia to end its claims on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. He also stressed the need for continued vigilance in response to Russian military buildup near Ukraine and in the Black Sea. Stoltenberg stated that Georgia and Ukraine have the right to choose their own alliances without any interference from Russia and discussed NATO efforts to
strengthen Georgia’s defense capabilities with maritime support, joint exercises, and information sharing. Stoltenberg stated “any future Russian aggression would come at a high price and have serious political and economic consequences for Russia.”

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky met with European Council President Charles Michel in Brussels, Belgium on December 15 ahead of a European Council meeting scheduled for December 16. Zelensky emphasized the importance of pursuing cooperation through the EU’s Eastern Partnership and reiterated that Ukraine seeks full membership in the European Union. Michel and Zelensky expressed the need to continue joint efforts to prevent an escalation along the borders of Ukraine. Zelensky expressed hope that EU leaders will send “clear signals” to Russia following the European Council meeting on December 16.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that Russia has “no right to interfere” in Ukraine’s sovereign decision to pursue NATO membership at the Riga NATO meeting on November 30. Stoltenberg emphasized Ukraine is a sovereign state and that the Kremlin has no right to dictate Ukraine’s policies. Stoltenberg said “any future Russian aggression against Ukraine would come at high price,” and called on Russia to de-escalate under threat of “serious political and economic consequences.”

Eastern and Central European Allies

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Finnish President Sauli Niinistö held a phone call on December 14. The Kremlin readout stated Putin informed Niinistö of the results of his call with US President Biden on December 7, Putin’s assessment of the situation around Ukraine, and Kyiv’s claimed violation of the Minsk agreements. Putin announced “the need to immediately begin negotiations in order to develop clear international legal agreements that would exclude any further NATO advance to the east and the deployment of weapons threatening Russia in neighboring states, primarily in Ukraine.” Putin stressed that “this is fully consistent with the principle of the indivisibility of security, enshrined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and the 1999 Istanbul Charter” and “expressed support for Sauli Niinistö’s initiative to organize a summit in 2025 to mark the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe.” The Finnish readout stated “the Presidents had a thorough discussion on the situation at the borders of Ukraine. President Niinistö expressed the grave concern on the tense situation and stressed the need to find a diplomatic resolution to it.”

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov met jointly with ambassadors from Austria, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Germany, and Switzerland on December 14. The Russian readout did not specify the topics of conversation.

The Deputy Foreign Ministers of Ukraine, Poland, and Lithuania (the “Lublin Triangle”) signed a joint action plan for countering Russian disinformation in Lutsk, Ukraine on December 11. Ukrainian Deputy Foreign Minister Mykola Tochytsky, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Marcin Przydacz, and Lithuanian Deputy Foreign Minister Mantas Adomenas participated in the meeting. The three states created the “Lublin Triangle” format on July 28, 2020 to support trilateral dialogue and “support Ukraine’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations.” The Lublin Triangle is a non-binding discussion format similar to the Visegrad Four or Bucharest Nine. The ministers discussed the Belarusian migrant crisis and Russian military escalation near the Ukrainian border. They emphasized the need for
coordination with NATO and the European Union to counter hybrid threats and prevent Russian aggression towards Ukraine. The ministers additionally signed a (non-public) Joint Action Plan for Countering Disinformation in 2022-2023. The plan “provides for the preparation of regular joint reports on information challenges and threats, the development of a joint response mechanism to Russia’s destabilization campaigns, the exchange of experience and the strengthening of institutional capacity to counter hybrid threats.”

Ukraine, Lithuania, and Georgia signed a memorandum of understanding to create a cybersecurity cooperation group on December 8. The joint group’s mission is to develop multistate capabilities for cyber threat analysis by developing standard procedures for tactical and operational-level information exchanges on cyber threats, security vulnerabilities, and incident response.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov and Lithuanian Defense Minister Arvidas Anusauskas discussed mutual Russian and Belarusian threats on December 8. The ministers discussed the intensification of Russian-Belarusian military cooperation and the concentration of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine. They also discussed Belarusian migrant trafficking on the Lithuanian-Belarusian border and the possible risks of Belarus moving a wave of migrants to the border with Ukraine.

Polish Air Force F-16 aircraft from Siauliai Air Base, Lithuania, conducted the first Alpha Scramble training over the Baltic Sea to intercept a Russian IL-20 reconnaissance aircraft on December 8. The Polish detachment Orlik-10 practiced intercepting an unknown aircraft visually resembling Russian IL-20 COOT A, which had failed to submit a flight plan and communicate with air traffic control. The exercise is a component of NATO’s Air Policing mission.

Kuleba met Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden on December 3. Kuleba and Landsbergis discussed Russian military deployments near Ukraine and Belarus’ migrant trafficking against Lithuania and Poland.

Zelensky, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, and Polish President Andrzej Duda issued a joint statement reaffirming support for Ukraine’s EU and NATO accession on December 2. Nausėda and Duda reiterated Lithuania’s and Poland’s support for Ukraine joining the EU and NATO. The statement also asserted that Belarus presents hybrid threats that impact all of European security and restated Polish and Lithuanian readiness to jointly oppose Russia’s Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

Kuleba met with Estonian Foreign Minister Eva-Maria Liimets on the sidelines of the NATO ministerial meeting in Riga, Latvia on December 1. Kuleba informed Liimets of the Russian military deployments near Ukraine and Liimets agreed to jointly oppose Russian aggression in the Baltic-Black Sea region. Liimets reiterated Estonia’s support for admitting Ukraine into the EU and NATO. Kuleba and Liimets also discussed further joint defense cooperation and responses to hybrid threats.

The defense ministers of the Bucharest Nine (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) issued a statement calling for the strengthening of NATO’s eastern flank “from the Baltic to Black Sea” on November 25. They also said it was necessary to work on a new defense strategy within NATO. US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks addressed the allies virtually and
“affirmed the U.S. commitment to NATO’s eastern flank and commented on recent Russian activity around Ukraine, the migrant crisis on the Belarusian-EU border, and strategic competition with the People’s Republic of China.”

Hicks also underscored that EU defense initiatives should remain coherent, mutually reinforcing, and interoperable with and available to NATO.

**Ukrainian Political Activity**

**Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev discussed bilateral relations and Turkish/Azerbaijani support for Ukraine at a meeting in Brussels, Belgium during the sixth Eastern Partnership Summit on December 15.**

Zelensky thanked Aliyev for Azerbaijan’s ongoing support for Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity against Russian aggression. Zelensky discussed the intensification of bilateral cooperation between the countries following his working visit to Azerbaijan in December 2019. Zelensky and Aliyev discussed the need to implement a transit route along the Europe-Caucasus-Asia route using rail and sea transport. Zelensky and Aliyev discussed transit construction plans implemented under the Great Construction National Program implemented in July 2020. Zelensky proposed a summit between Ukraine, Turkey, and Azerbaijan in Kyiv in February 2022.

**Ukrainian President Zelensky gave an interview to Italian newspaper La Repubblica on December 13.**

Zelensky stated Russia is increasing its troops numbers on the Ukrainian border to blackmail the West, and stated that “in some European capitals fear prevails,” referencing Germany’s decision to block the sale of weaponry to Ukraine. Zelensky stated Ukraine constantly pursues a diplomatic solution to the conflict because it is aware of the human cost, and stated “it is questionable whether or not Russian society is ready or not to pay for the attempt to occupy another part of Ukraine with the lives of its children.” In response to a question on Ukraine’s willingness to give up its NATO aspirations as part of a deal with Russia, Zelensky stated Russia does not honor any agreements, referencing the 1994 Budapest Memorandum. Finally, Zelensky stated he will not be able to say Western efforts have had any affect on Russia until Russia withdraws troops from the Ukrainian border.

**Ukrainian President Zelensky stated Ukraine must rely on its own military and has done everything possible to prevent a Russian invasion in an interview with 1 + 1 news on December 10.**

Ukrainian oligarch and Zelensky backer Ihor Kolomoisky owns 1 + 1. Zelensky said that despite Kyiv’s desire to join NATO, admittance is in the hands of NATO’s member-states and that some unspecified states are putting “barriers” in Ukraine’s path. Zelensky said that Ukraine must be able to confront Russian aggression on its own if it must, and stated the willingness of every Ukrainian to fight if needed is “stronger than any military bloc.”

Zelensky stated Ukrainian society does not support coup attempts and claimed groups responsible for coups “saw that society does not support them.” Zelensky did not provide further details to support his claim of a Akhmetov-backed coup against Ukraine he claimed was planned for December 1-2, but stated “some forces” received signals from abroad that “forced them to halt their intentions” – alluding to preventing a Russian-backed coup without saying so directly.

Zelensky additionally discussed several results of his December 9 call with Joe Biden:

- Ukraine must retain the Normandy Format as-is with France and Germany, stating Macron and new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz both support the format.
Zelensky stated Biden is open to a role in the Normandy format, however, “not just moderating the process or watching from the sidelines.” Zelensky stated American participation could also take the form of a separate platform that cooperates with the Normandy Four.

Zelensky does not rule out direct talks with Putin and “sees support for this direction” from Europe and the US. Zelensky directly stated Ukraine will not hold direct talks with the DNR/LNR without Russian participation, however, and praised Macron for his support of this Ukrainian stance.

Zelensky claimed that during his call with Biden, he received a “message of assurances from Russia that it is not going to continue the escalation of the territories of our state” and praised this “small and not final but very important result” of Ukraine’s efforts to prevent an invasion.

Zelensky noted Putin only wants to talk to the United States, not any other states, but that Ukraine and its allies seek to present a united front.

Finally, Zelensky stated he would not rule out a referendum on the status of “Donbas, Crimea, or ending the war in general,” while claiming Ukraine will not give up its territories. This is not an inflection from Zelensky’s previous rhetoric that any possible decision could be put to a national referendum as a populist measure.

Zelensky said that he does not “exclude the possibility” of holding a “referendum” to grant Donbas increased legal autonomy on December 10. This is a significant rhetorical inflection for Zelensky, who has so far refused to capitulate to Kremlin demands and irreversibly undermine Ukraine’s sovereignty.

Zelensky and French President Emmanuel Macron discussed Russia’s military buildup near Ukraine on December 10. Zelensky and Macron discussed resuming negotiations in the Normandy Format Tripartite Contact Group (TCG). Zelensky and Macron agreed to continue discussions on security issues at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels on December 15.

Military Times reported that Ukraine’s Defense Ministry assessed that there are approximately 120,000 Russian troops near Ukraine’s border as of December 8. The updated Ukrainian assessment reportedly includes 98,000 ground troops and approximately 22,000 airborne and naval personnel.

Ukraine’s Military Intelligence Directorate (GRU) reported on December 7 that Russia is reinforcing the front line in Donbas with an unspecified number of 122mm self-propelled artillery, tanks, and infantry fighting vehicles. The GRU also stated that Russian forces increased proxy sniper readiness through increased training.

Reznikov called on Canada, the United States, and the UK to provide Ukraine with additional military support in an interview published on December 5. Reznikov stated Ukraine needs Canadian, US, and UK assistance in securing anti-aircraft missiles, modern warplanes, navy vessels, and electronic jamming equipment. Reznikov also suggested that Canada should increase its training mission in Yavoriv, Ukraine, from 50 to 500 instructors. Reznikov said Canada should deploy more Canadian trainers to Kharkiv, Mariupol, Kramatorsk, Odesa, and Zminiy Island to deter a Russian military action. Canadian Chief of Defense Staff Wayne Eyre said on December 2 that Canada will not increase its military presence in Ukraine.
Reznikov stated Russia may conduct a large-scale escalation at the end of January during an address to the Ukrainian parliament on December 3. Reznikov said Russia has accumulated approximately 94,300 troops near Ukraine and in Donbas and Crimea. Reznikov stated that Russia deployed over 50 battalion tactical groups (BTGs) to the Ukrainian border between April and September. Reznikov said that Russia has 41 BTGs at a constant state of readiness around Ukraine, 33 on a permanent basis and eight “additionally transferred to Crimea,” and implied that Russia left military equipment at Ukraine’s borders after some BTGs returned to their permanent positions earlier in the year. Reznikov noted that Russia began its winter training season near Ukraine in the Bryansk and Smolensk regions, activated reconnaissance assets, established signals, and camouflaged the troops throughout the week of November 21-28. Reznikov said if two Russian Baltic Fleet landing ships redeploy from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, Russia will have nine vessels with a capacity to transport 3,000 servicemen and up to 250 armored combat vehicles to the region. Reznikov said Ukraine and its partners are looking for political ways to frame a potential invasion as detrimental and unacceptable to Russia. Ukraine likely seeks to leverage Russia’s dependance on the European gas market and the threat of further sanctions to prevent an invasion. Reznikov announced that Ukraine and the UK are building two naval bases in Ochakovo, Mykolaiv, and Berdyansk, Zaporizhia. Reznikov said that Ukraine’s main priority is establishing a Western-supported anti-missile program by 2032—a goal that will likely prompt further Russian military campaigns.

Zelensky and Canadian President Justin Trudeau had a phone call on Russian threats to Ukraine on December 2. Zelensky and Trudeau discussed Russian security threats to Ukraine and agreed on the need to increase economic, political, and sanctions pressure against Russia in the event of an escalation against Ukraine.

Zelensky restated Kyiv’s desire to implement Ukraine’s Association Agreement with the European Union and stated his readiness to talk to Russia at an address to the Ukrainian parliament on December 1. Zelensky reiterated that Kyiv aims to implement the European Union Association Agreement and claimed that Ukraine has fulfilled 60 percent of the agreement’s requirements. Zelensky stated that negotiating with Russia is necessary to end the war in Donbas. The Kremlin will likely intensify military pressure against Ukraine and NATO over the next several weeks to curtail Kyiv’s efforts to join Western structures.

Ukraine’s GRU claimed on November 30 that Russia sent the DNR and LNR more ammunition, lubricants, military equipment, UAVs, and electronic warfare assets in November. This report, if accurate, indicates a growing Russian command and control development activity in occupied Donbas that could support Russian combat operations in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense on November 29 claimed that Russia deployed an unspecified “group of Russian military personnel” to the DNR and LNR to strengthen DNR and LNR reconnaissance, sabotage, and sapper units sometime during the week of November 21-28. Ukraine’s defense ministry did not provide details on the size or organization of this Russian military “group.”

Kuleba gave a speech articulating Ukraine’s strategy to deter a Russian invasion on November 29. Kuleba said Ukraine seeks to deter and demotivate Russia from conducting further military activities against Ukraine. He said Ukraine proposed to its international partners a package of measures consisting of three main points: political
containment of Russia, economic deterrence from new sanctions tied to a new Russian offensive, and the enhancement of Ukraine’s defensive capabilities though international defense cooperation.

Zelensky claimed that Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov (a former Party of Regions funder, Viktor Yanukovych partner, and alleged Donetsk mafia boss) was planning a coup that did not occur in tandem with Russian actors on December 1 or 2 in a carefully orchestrated press conference on November 26. Zelensky stated that Ukrainian intelligence received information about a planned coup against Zelensky’s government on December 1 or 2. Zelensky stated that “representatives of Russia” along with Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov were planning the coup. Zelensky suggested that the Russian coup attempt may be enlisting Akhmetov’s participation without Akhmetov’s knowledge. Zelensky did not present any evidence of these claims. Zelensky also stated that Ukraine has received assurances from allies—the United States, Canada, UK, the EU, and Turkey—that they will support Ukraine in the event of an escalation.

Ukrainian defense officials continue to issue contradictory statements about a Russian offensive as of November 25. Secretary of Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council Oleksiy Danilov contradicted Ukrainian GRU Chief Kirill Budanov’s claims of a Russian offensive around mid-January on November 25. Danilov stated “we do not see the threats that Mr. Budanov is talking about for January 15.” Danilov characterized Russian threats against Ukraine as not new, and said that Ukraine is ready to respond.

Zelensky had a phone call with German Chancellor Angela Merkel about the Russian buildup on November 25. They agreed to coordinate international efforts to oppose Russian threats and preserve sanctions policy. They also discussed the migration crisis on the border with Belarus and Poland.

Zelensky had a telephone conversation with the President of the European Council Charles Michel on November 25. They agreed to coordinate efforts and discussed the Russian buildup. Michel discussed the results of his November 24 call with Putin. Michel said that de-escalation of the situation could be helped by contacts between the Ukrainian and Russian sides with the participation of the EU.

Ukrainian Force Deployments

Several unspecified Ukrainian anti-tank and engineering units conducted joint exercises on the border of occupied Crimea on December 15. Ukrainian Lieutenant General Sergei Naev said that participating troops simulated defending against an armored assault by redeploying anti-tank artillery and installing minefields.

The Ukrainian Defense Ministry announced on December 14 that the Ukrainian Armed Forces are strengthening air defenses around critical infrastructure. The announcement specified that the Armed Forces will strengthen defenses (without specifying how) on the Dnieper River bridges, hydroelectric power plants, nuclear power plants, and other unspecified critical infrastructure. The Ukrainian MoD additionally stated Ukrainian forces are ready and able to protect critical infrastructure and the national transportation network. It is unclear from this announcement if the Ukrainian military is redeploying air defense assets or increasing the readiness of units already in place.
Ukraine launched a new operation to reinforce the Ukrainian-Belarusian border on November 24. Ukraine’s State Border Guard Service announced a new special operation on the border with Belarus called “Poiissa” with border guards, national police, national guard, Ukrainian army, and “other reserves” to counteract illegal migrants on November 24.269 Ukrainian Interior Minister Denis Monastyrskyi announced on November 11 that Ukraine would reinforce the border with Belarus with 3,000 border guards, 3,500 national guardsmen, and 2,000 national police.270 Ukraine has not openly deployed military units to the Belarusian border or elsewhere as of November 24.

Ukraine used Javelins for the first time in training exercises in Zaporizhia in mid-to-late November. Ukraine’s General Staff stated on November 23 that Ukraine used Javelins and Bayraktar TB2 drones in training exercises at the Shiroky Lan Training Ground, Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine.271 Ukraine has not used the Javelin in combat operations yet.

The OSCE observed a likely Ukrainian electronic warfare system near Donbas for the first time on November 23. The OSCE reports that they spotted a “probable” Ukrainian Khortytsia-M electronic warfare system about five kilometers from the front line, east of Mariupol.272 This is the first sighting of the Ukrainian electronic warfare system near the front.

Belarus

The Belarusian military will conduct a joint staff training from December 14-17.273 The Chief of the Belarusian General staff will oversee the exercise, which will include the “structural divisions of the Ministry of Defense,” the General Staff, and unspecified command and control bodies. The exercise is intended to improve the coherence of military command and control bodies.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko reiterated his threat to cut off gas transit to Europe through the Yamal-Europe pipeline in response to EU sanctions on December 13.274 The European Union imposed a fifth round of sanctions on Belarus in December 2021 in response to the Belarusian state-manufactured migrant crisis along the Belarus-Poland border in November 2021. Russian Press Secretary Dmitry Peskov stated that Russian state-owned gas company Gazprom will still fulfill its obligations to supply gas to Europe and that Lukashenko’s threat came without Kremlin approval.275 Lukashenko made the same threat on November 11, prompting Putin to state Lukashenko did not consult with him beforehand and state and decision by Belarus to halt gas transit would harm relations with Russia.276

Russia continues to modernize Belarusian brigades through early December.

Russia delivered an unspecified quantity of modernized BTR-82A armored personnel carriers to the Belarusian 6th Mechanized Brigade in Grodno, Belarus, on December 9.277 Russia similarly gave an unspecified quantity BTR-82s to the Belarusian 120th Brigade in Minsk on December 2.278 The Kremlin seeks to modernize Belarus’ maneuver elements to improve interoperability and integration with Russian ground forces.

Lukashenko had a phone call with Putin about Belarusian-Russian relations and “outside threats” concerning both countries on December 10.279 The call followed Lukashenko and Putin’s participation in the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council on December 10. Minsk did not specify the contents of the discussed topics and the Kremlin did not confirm the call with its own readout.
Lukashenko announced he granted 448 Ukrainians Belarusian citizenship on December 7. Lukashenko stated that Belarus has granted Belarusian citizenship to approximately 1,200 Ukrainians since August 9, 2021. The Kremlin and Minsk may frame Ukrainians as refugees to support a larger information operation about a humanitarian catastrophe in Ukraine that necessitates Russian intervention.

Active-duty Belarusian forces began countrywide combat readiness classes to improve their ability to support a mass mobilization on December 7. Belarusian forces have not mobilized as of December 11. The training emphasizes maintaining mobilization readiness for large Belarusian formations and command and control elements. This training supports assessed Russian efforts to permanently deploy Russian forces to Belarus.

Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko announced Minsk’s intent to develop industrial cooperation with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) on December 7. Golovchenko stated that Western sanctions against Belarus will not achieve their goals and that Russia and Belarus can “withstand any pressure.”

Lukashenko announced that he will deliver an address to Belarus’ parliament in January and repeated false claims about a NATO buildup near Belarus on December 6. Lukashenko stated that Russia will not attack Ukraine and reiterated Belarus’ support for Russia. Lukashenko stated that NATO seeks to encircle Russia with a “a chain [of states hostile to Russia] from the Black to Baltic Sea.” Lukashenko repeated his claim that the West is conducting a hybrid war color revolution against Belarus. Lukashenko stated that if opposition leaders ousted Lukashenko’s regime in 2020, then there would have been a “NATO bloc near Smolensk.” Lukashenko reiterated Kremlin narratives that the Belarusian opposition seeks to break the Union State with Russia, bring Belarus into NATO, create an autocephalous (independent from Moscow) Belarusian Orthodox church, and ban the Russian language.

The Belarusian Defense Ministry claimed that a Ukrainian Mi-8 helicopter violated Belarusian airspace in Novaya Rudnya, Belarus, on December 4. Belarusian officials claimed that a Ukrainian Mi-8 flew one kilometer into Belarusian airspace while conducting Ukraine’s “Poissya” border security operation. Ukraine’s State Border Service denied any violations on December 4. A Belarusian border guard official said Belarusian border guards “will act extremely harshly” if Ukraine further violates the border. These claims reinforce Belarusian and Kremlin information operations about a supposed Ukrainian threat to Belarus and support Russian efforts to set informational conditions for deploying Russian forces into Belarus.

Kremlin news outlet Rossiya Segodnya published on December 2 that Lukashenko stated he would not exclude increasing Belarus’ armed forces from 65,000 to 70,000 men to “cover [Belarus’] south” during a November 30 interview. Lukashenko also stated that recently announced joint Russian-Belarusian exercises on Belarus’ southern border with Ukraine will occur within the next two months.

Lukashenko said Ukraine is “under external control” during the November 30 Rossiya Segodnya interview. This statement supports a Russian propaganda narrative that NATO and Western states, primarily the United States, have turned Ukraine into a proxy. Lukashenko’s rhetoric is increasingly aligned with Kremlin narratives in an unprecedented
manner. Analysts should consider Lukashenko’s actions as increasingly directed by the Kremlin. Belarusian forces will likely support Kremlin objectives in any intensified military and information operations against Ukraine and/or NATO.

**Lukashenko said that recent Western actions encouraged deeper Russian-Belarusian integration at a meeting with the governor of Russia’s Astrakhan Oblast on December 2.** Lukashenko’s statement about “Western actions” references both a falsely claimed NATO hybrid war that Lukashenko alleges the West has waged against Belarus since fall 2020, and a falsely claimed NATO buildup near Russian and Belarusian borders since fall 2021.

**Russian military units’ freedom of movement in Belarus will likely increase in 2022.** Belarusian Armed Forces officially began the new military training year for 2021-2022 on December 1 with an explicit emphasis on intensive combat training. The Belarusian MoD stated that Belarusian exercises in 2022 will occur not only at training grounds but also in “individual terrain sections of [Belarus’] territory.” A permanent Russian deployment to Belarus is increasingly likely. Belarusian exercises typically occur at established military training grounds; the extended range of new exercises in Belarus likely presage expanded Russian force posture shifts within Belarus. Belarusian officials stated on November 29 that Russia and Belarus will conduct a joint exercise on Belarus’ southern border with Ukraine at an unspecified future date. Belarusian units have not yet begun conducting exercises as of December 1, however they will likely begin within the next several days or weeks.

**Lukashenko said he would not exclude offering to host Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus if NATO deploys nuclear weapons to Eastern Europe on November 30.** Lukashenko implied that Belarus is ready to resume hosting Russian nuclear infrastructure—as it did during the Soviet era—if NATO deploys nuclear missile structures to Eastern Europe. This is a significant inflection in Lukashenko’s rhetoric about his openness to hosting Russian weapon systems in Belarus. Prior to August 2020 Lukashenko was stalwartly opposed to Russia increasing its military infrastructure in Belarus beyond two Soviet legacy radar stations. This statement indicates an increased likelihood of a permanent Russian force deployment to Belarus. Lukashenko and Putin also had phone call on November 29 about the situation in Belarus and Russia prior to the interview on November 30, which the Kremlin did not report. Putin warned against NATO deploying hypersonic missiles to Ukraine on November 30.

**Lukashenko signaled that Belarus will support Russia during any military escalation in Donbas on November 29.** Lukashenko stated that if the West conducts a military operation in Donbas or against Russian borders, then “Belarus will not be left on the sidelines. It is very clear on whose side Belarus will be.” Lukashenko also reiterated false Kremlin claims about reports of a Russian offensive being propaganda and false claims of increased NATO force buildups against Belarus. This is a significant inflection in Lukashenko’s rhetoric towards Ukraine. Lukashenko’s rhetoric on Donbas typically has not so closely aligned with Kremlin talking points.

**Belarus’ Ministry of Defense announced that Russia and Belarus will conduct a joint exercise on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, possibly on December 1.** Belarusian Defense Minister Khrenin announced that all Belarusian troops will begin combat exercises on December 1 at a Belarusian General Staff meeting on November 29. Khrenin also announced a joint military exercise with Russia on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border on an unspecified future date which could correspond with the Belarusian exercises that will begin on
December 1. Khrenin stated that enemy force groups near Belarus’ western and southern borders necessitate these measures to protect the Union State. Russia will very likely deploy ground forces to Belarus within the next several days or weeks.

A Belarusan Mechanized Brigade from Grodno reportedly will deploy to Belarus’s southern border with Ukraine. Belarusan online news outlet Motolko reported on November 29 that the Belarusan 6th Mechanized Brigade based in Folush, Grodno, will deploy to Belarus’ southern border with Ukraine. There is no open-source evidence of a deployment of the Belarusan 6th Brigade towards Ukraine as of November 29.

The Belarusan MoD continued to accuse Poland and Lithuania of deploying forces closer to Belarus on November 26. The Belarusan Head of the Main Directorate of Ideological Work of the Ministry of Defense on November 26 stated, “Unfortunately, we cannot note any positive steps taken by our neighbors [regarding alleged Polish and Baltic military deployments near Belarus]. Along with the previously announced unfriendly steps to deploy troops and infrastructure, which make it possible to significantly increase the combat strength and create groupings in a short time, we note the further actions of our neighbors aimed at escalating the situation.” The official claimed that Lithuania concentrated approximately 4,000 troops near the Belarusian border and criticized Ukraine’s new “Poissya” border security operation. The Belarusan MoD stated it is prepared to quickly create its own force groupings if necessary.

Russia and Belarus decided on November 25 to increase the quantity of combined Russian-Belarusan air patrols in Belarusan airspace. The Belarusan MoD stated that it made the decision to increase joint patrols due to an increase in foreign aviation around Belarus’ border—a reference to claimed NATO flights near Belarus. A combined Russian-Belarusan tactical group of Su-30SM conducted a flight patrol along the Belarusian border on November 25.

Russian elements’ presence in Belarusan exercises will likely further expand in 2022. Chief of the Belarusan General Staff Viktor Gulevich stated on November 23 that the Belarusan MoD “significantly adjusted” the training process of the Belarusan Armed Forces in 2021-2022 after “taking into account the difficult military-political situation created by Western countries” in regard to the migrant crisis. “We are forced to respond to the intensification of military activity along the outer contour of the State Border of the Republic of Belarus.” Gulevich accused a “belt of unfriendly states” of surrounding Belarus like an “anaconda.” Gulevich stated Belarus will thus intensify Belarusan exercises.

Strategic Calendar

November – December: Waterways near the Pinsk Marshes in Belarus freeze. Some bogs never freeze. Generally, Russian bogs usually begin to freeze about two weeks after the stable transition of air temperature through 0 degrees Celsius to negative values. Pinsk historically gets to around this condition in late December through February. Russian geographic information indicates that traversing the Pinsk Marshes, even in winter, is dangerous; the ice is thin in many spots and even experienced adventurers who traverse it on foot can fall through and drown. It is unclear how traversable the marshes actually are for mechanized forces, even in ideal winter conditions.
December 1: Zelensky delivered an address to the Verkhovna Rada in which he reiterated Ukraine’s desire to implement the European Union Association Agreement and articulated readiness to talk to the Kremlin.

December 2: US, Russian, and Ukrainian foreign ministers met in Stockholm, Sweden.312

December 6-10: New German Cabinet.313

December 7: Putin-Biden videoconference.314

December 15: Eastern Partnership summit focusing on “stability and cooperation,” in Brussels, Belgium.315

December 23: Tentative date for a Putin end-of-year address.316

December–January: Anticipated joint Russo-Belarusian exercise on Belarus’ southern border with Ukraine.317

January: Lukashenko gives speech to the Belarusian parliament and nation.318

January 15–February 15: Seasonal freeze in Ukraine that the Ukrainian GRU is forecasting the Russians will plan maneuvers around. Ukraine’s National Security and Defense Council contradicts GUR’s claims and does not see these dates as particularly significant as of November 25.319

Late March–Mid April: Rasputitsa, the annual period of snow melt that makes travel difficult, occurs—though it varies by region and local climate factors.320
space to move military equipment). The Russian Steel Association made similar complaints in late October.

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