



Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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Click [here](#) to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Click [here](#) to see ISW's 3D control of terrain topographic map of Ukraine. Use of a computer (not a mobile device) is strongly recommended for using this data-heavy tool.

Click [here](#) to access ISW's archive of interactive time-lapse maps of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. These maps complement the static control-of-terrain map that ISW produces daily by showing a dynamic frontline. ISW will update this time-lapse map archive monthly.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 3:00pm ET on December 14. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 15 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin displayed notable confidence in publicly discussing Russia's war on Ukraine during a joint event combining his annual press conference and "Direct Line" forum on December 14 but did not clearly define his envisioned end state for the full-scale invasion he launched on February 24, 2022. The "Direct Line" is an annual highly staged forum in which Putin answers pre-selected questions from the Russian public. Putin notably skipped the "Direct Line" in 2022, the first time he did not hold it since 2012. Putin routinely abstained from discussing the war in depth at high profile events throughout 2022, suggesting that he was uncertain about his ability to shape the Russian information space on this topic.¹ Putin used the December 14, 2023, event to discuss his objectives in Ukraine, specific operational and tactical situations along the front, and specific concerns from Russian military personnel and volunteers in a much more public and prolonged fashion than in his previous statements about the war since the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Putin's willingness to center large portions of the event on the war in Ukraine suggests an increased confidence in his ability to address the Russian public on the subject, which may be indicative of his own personal confidence in Russia's prospects in Ukraine following the relatively successful Russian defensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast and perceived wavering Western support for Ukraine. Putin did not offer a new approach to the war, describe how Russia intends to achieve victory in Ukraine or specify what a Russian victory would look like. Many of Putin's statements on December 14 are similar to the boilerplate claims about the Russian war in Ukraine that he made during a speech at a Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) Collegium meeting almost a year ago, for example.²

Putin reiterated his maximalist objectives for the Russian war in Ukraine, which are likely purposefully opaque to be inclusive of additional goals that Putin may seek to pursue now or later. Putin responded to a question about whether Russia's goals in Ukraine are the same as they were by stating that Russia's goals have not changed and include the "denazification" and "demilitarization" of Ukraine and imposing a "neutral status" on Ukraine.³ Russian calls for "denazification" are thinly-veiled calls for regime change -- demands for the removal of the elected Ukrainian government and its replacement with a government acceptable to the Kremlin. Putin has not described what change to the Ukrainian Armed Forces would constitute "demilitarization," although Russia's goal is almost certainly to strip Ukraine of the means to defend itself and allow Russia to impose its will upon Ukraine through force whenever the Kremlin so chooses. Putin claimed that Ukrainian forces lost almost 750 tanks during the Ukrainian 2023 counteroffensive and stated that this is

“demilitarization,” acknowledging that the term encompasses a large-scale reduction in military capabilities.⁴ Russian calls for Ukrainian “neutrality” are demands that Ukraine amend its constitution, which currently commits Ukraine to seeking NATO membership, and commit not to join NATO or the European Union (EU). They are part of a longer list of broader Russian objectives beyond Ukraine that include a permanent moratorium on NATO expansion (which would require a change in NATO’s charter that, in turn, would require the negotiation and ratification of a new treaty between NATO member states), a ban on the deployment of Western strike weapons near Russia, and the de facto withdrawal of NATO forces to their 1997 posture.⁵

Putin claimed that Ukrainian officials were open to Russian demands for “denazification” and “demilitarization” during negotiations in Istanbul in March 2022, likely in an effort to portray these objectives as reasonable.⁶ Putin stated that Ukrainian officials withdrew from agreements about “demilitarization” and “denazification,” a departure from a recurring Russian information operation that falsely alleges that Western officials coerced Ukraine to reject an agreement favorable to Russia.⁷ Putin once again expressed his unwillingness to engage in meaningful negotiations with Ukraine and stated that there will only be peace when Russia achieves its maximalist objectives.⁸ ISW continues to assess that Putin’s maximalist objectives are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender.⁹

These maximalist objectives also do not exclude Russia’s annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories or additional territorial conquests. The Kremlin appears to be returning to expansionist rhetoric last observed before the full-scale invasion about a “partitioned Ukraine” that rejects key components of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity, and which includes the stated intention of the occupation and annexation of additional Ukrainian territory.¹⁰ This rhetoric does not set limits for further Russian expansion and may be aimed at allowing Putin to introduce new territorial objectives in Ukraine when he sees fit. Putin notably echoed this heightened expansionist rhetoric on December 14 by claiming that Russia historically controlled the entire Black Sea region and that the entire region, like Crimea, has nothing to do with Ukraine.¹¹ Russian control of the “entire Black Sea region” would encompass not just occupied Crimea and Kherson Oblast but also large parts of Mykolaiv and Odesa oblasts.¹² Putin falsely claimed that Odesa City is a “Russian city,” a rhetorical line that Russian officials have often used to justify the Russian occupation of Ukrainian cities in eastern and southern Ukraine.¹³ Putin stated that Ukraine’s alleged “pro-Russian” southeast, an area where Russia now occupies a large amount of territory, has always been important to Russia, although it is unclear how Putin views the boundaries of this “pro-Russian” southeastern Ukraine.

Putin attempted to rhetorically contextualize Russia’s continued maximalist objectives in Ukraine within the wider conception of Russian “sovereignty,” an ideological line that has been consistent in the Kremlin’s framing of Russian national security and foreign policy since before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. “Direct Line” host and Russian journalist Ekaterina Berezovskaya asked Putin about his announcement to run for president again in 2024, including what Putin’s main goals are for Russia domestically and abroad.¹⁴ Putin responded to Berezovskaya’s question by invoking the concept of Russian sovereignty (*suvernitet*), suggesting that his central policy as president is to protect and maintain Russian sovereignty. Putin clarified that the conception of sovereignty is informed by external sovereignty, meaning Russia’s defense capacity and external security environment; public sovereignty, meaning the rights and freedoms of Russian citizens as facilitated by Russia’s political system; and economic-technological sovereignty, which enables Russia to secure its own future. The concept of Russian sovereignty is not unique to rhetorical justifications for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—rather it has been enshrined in Russia’s pre-war National Security Strategy (2021) and Russia’s updated 2023 Foreign Policy Concept.¹⁵ The National Security Strategy outlines Russia’s right to “protect the rights of compatriots abroad,” which Russia has intentionally defined in broad terms as ethnic Russians and Russian speakers abroad.¹⁶ Russia also purposefully does not define “compatriots” as only those holding Russian citizenship.¹⁷ As Putin continues to employ the concepts of “denazification” and the fiction of a “genocide in Donbas” of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers as justifications for the invasion of Ukraine, the idea of Russian sovereignty will become increasingly synonymous with Russia’s grand-strategic objectives in Ukraine.¹⁸

Putin claimed that the Russian force grouping in Ukraine is far larger than even Russian officials have characterized, likely in an attempt to both address persistent Russian concerns about a new mobilization wave and to demoralize the West and Ukraine. Putin stated that there are 617,000 Russian personnel in the “combat zone” when discussing the length of the frontline, notably different from the 420,000 Russian military personnel that Ukrainian intelligence officials estimated were in Ukraine in September 2023.¹⁹ Putin’s figure likely includes all military personnel such as mobilized personnel, contract soldiers (*kontraktniki*), and volunteers (*dobrovoltsy*) in irregular formations operating along the frontline and in the rear.²⁰ Russian authorities often use “combat zone” and “special military operation zone” interchangeably, which can include rear areas in occupied Ukraine and Russia.²¹ Putin claimed that 244,000 mobilized personnel out of the 300,000 total personnel mobilized during partial mobilization are operating in Ukraine and that Russia recruited a total of 486,000 people in crypto-mobilization efforts since the beginning of 2023.²² Russian Security Council Deputy Chairperson Dmitry Medvedev claimed on November 9 that the Russian military has recruited 410,000 contract, volunteer, and conscripted military personnel since January 1, 2023, then later claimed on December 1 that the Russian military recruited over 452,000 personnel since January 1, 2023.²³

The difference in the reported numbers of Russian personnel involved in the war is likely due to different categorizations of Russian military personnel and does not reflect a significant increase in Russian personnel on the frontline, which Ukrainian forces have consistently been repelling. Putin notably offered these figures in response to a question about a second wave of mobilization and explicitly stated that these force generation figures show that there is no need for a subsequent mobilization wave. Putin also likely meant for the 617,000 number to scare the West and Ukraine with Russia’s force generation capabilities, although Putin’s figure is for the Russian army currently fighting in Ukraine and thus suggests that the Ukrainian military has been repelling offensive operations and conducting counteroffensive operations against a far larger enemy force than was previously reported.

Putin notably addressed the tactical and operational situation in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast but refrained from discussing active Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine. Putin stated that almost all Russian forces are in “the active stage of action,” a phrase notably different from his and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu’s previous characterization of Russian offensive operations in Ukraine as an “active defense.”²⁴ Putin acknowledged Russian operations attempting to repel Ukrainian forces from Krynky (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River) but framed Russian forces’ failure to push Ukrainian forces to west (right) bank Kherson Oblast as an operation to purposefully lure and attrit Ukrainian forces operating near Krynky.²⁵ Putin’s emphasis on the tactical situation near Krynky and his decision not to discuss any other sector of the frontline may reflect his sensitivity to continued Russian information space neuralgia about Russian operations on east bank Kherson Oblast. Russian milbloggers have been increasingly critical of the Russian failure to repel Ukrainian forces from the east bank of the Dnipro River.²⁶ Putin’s comment highlighting Russian forces’ inability to oust Ukrainian forces from the east bank is likely also a critique of Russian “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky, who may be struggling to establish a unified command for the grouping of forces.²⁷ The current Russian “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces is comprised of disparate elements of recently transferred and degraded units and formations and at least two subordinate elements of the newly formed 104th Airborne (VDV) Division.²⁸ The UK Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported that elements of the 104th VDV Division suffered “exceptionally heavy losses” attempting to repel Ukrainian forces from east bank Kherson Oblast in early December 2023 during its combat debut.²⁹ Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets also stated that elements of the Russian 328th and 337th VDV Regiments (104th VDV Division) suffered high equipment and personnel losses during five days of continuous attacks on the east bank.³⁰ These reported heavy losses among the 104th VDV Division challenge Putin’s description of a successful Russian operation effort to disproportionately attrit Ukrainian forces on the east bank.

Putin’s public discussions about issues at the front and about the Russian war effort in general may redirect public anger about problems in the war toward the Russian Ministry of Defense

(MoD). Putin has historically used his highly staged annual “Direct Line” event to create a clear divide between incompetent, corrupt, and overly bureaucratic Russian officials and himself as a capable and caring leader who can quickly resolve average Russians’ issues.³¹ The Kremlin has often included highly personal calls for assistance in the event so that Putin can publicly resolve issues in front of a live audience. This year’s “Direct Line” event applied this highly personal model to specific issues that Russian military personnel and volunteers are facing along the front and with receiving benefits and promised support.³² This year’s event, inadvertently or not, cast the MoD in the role of the incompetent, corrupt, and overly bureaucratic Russian authority, a characterization that Russian ultranationalist milbloggers have routinely levied at the MoD.³³ The Kremlin allowed Russian ultranationalists to express criticism against the MoD and Russian military leadership for Russian failures in Ukraine up until that ire expressed itself in the Wagner Group’s June 24, 2023, rebellion.³⁴ Since the Wagner rebellion Russian authorities have attempted to establish more control over the Russian information space through self-censorship efforts that largely achieved the intended effect of reducing public criticism of how the Russian military is conducting the war in Ukraine.³⁵ Putin also publicly backed the Russian military leadership following Wagner’s rebellion and has shown no indications that he intends to reverse course from his support for Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and Chief of the General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov.³⁶ Putin will likely face the risk of increasing public ire at the Russian MoD, possibly undoing some of the Kremlin’s work to reestablish the MoD as an organ worthy of deference and respect, if he desires to discuss specific issues about the war in public during his 2024 presidential campaign. Putin may intend to shift responsibility for Russian failures and issues with the war to the MoD during his presidential campaign but does so at the risk of emboldening the same widespread anti-MoD sentiments that prompted Wagner’s rebellion.

Putin also attempted to convince the Russian public that the Russian economy is resilient in the face of international sanctions and the fallout of the war in Ukraine. Putin stated that international observers and Russians were surprised that Russia had created the margin of economic and financial stability required to weather Western sanctions following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.³⁷ Putin listed a series of statistics detailing the growth and stability of the Russian economy and only acknowledged that inflation may pose a problem for Russia in 2024.³⁸ Putin specifically claimed that Russians will see average increases in real wages and income, a talking point in line with previous reports that Putin would attempt to promote economic stability as a main component of his presidential campaign.³⁹ Putin later talked about specific issues with rising prices of consumer goods, strains on the Russian automobile market, and systemic issues with Russian civil aviation production, all contrasting with his earlier depiction of a strong Russian economy.⁴⁰ Putin has routinely attempted to assuage the Russian public’s concern that the war in Ukraine will have long-term economic impacts and he will likely continue to address Russian economic anxiety throughout his 2024 presidential campaign.⁴¹

Putin continued to express an increasingly anti-Israel position on the Israel-Hamas war, likely signaling a continuing decline in Russian-Israeli relations. In response to a question posed by a Turkish journalist, Putin called the situation in Gaza a “disaster,” while praising Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan for his attempts to find a resolution to the conflict.⁴² Putin reiterated his support for a Palestinian state with its capital in East Jerusalem and claimed that Russia discussed providing additional measures of humanitarian support to Gaza with several Arab countries, but that Israel rejected the suggestion.⁴³ Putin notably used his response to several questions unrelated to the Israel-Hamas war to indirectly criticize Israel.⁴⁴ A journalist also posed a question that would have allowed Putin to reiterate a Russian rhetorical line directly denouncing antisemitism, but Putin chose to focus on other aspects of the question.⁴⁵ Putin has continually expressed anti-Israel positions while feigning interest in being a neutral arbitrator for the conflict, most recently in a December 10 telephone conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.⁴⁶

Putin attempted to downplay deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations and extricate Russian peacekeeping forces from any responsibility for Armenia’s loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as Armenia appears to be effectively abstaining from participating in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Putin claimed that Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan’s absence from formal CSTO, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

events is due to Armenian domestic processes and not related to any intent to end its membership in any of these organizations. Putin also claimed that “it was not [Russia] who abandoned Nagorno-Karabakh” and claimed that Armenia did not inform Russia about its decision to “recognize that Nagorno-Karabakh is part of Azerbaijan.”⁴⁷

The European Union (EU) decided on December 14 to formally open EU accession negotiations to Ukraine. European Council President Charles Michel announced that the European Council will open accession negotiations to both Ukraine and Moldova.⁴⁸ Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who has notably consistently opposed talks on Ukraine's accession to the EU, responded to Michel's announcement and stated that Hungary did not participate in the decision, calling it a “bad decision.”⁴⁹

The US Congress passed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2024 on December 14, which notably includes an extension of the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI). The NDAA approves \$886.3 billion for defense and authorizes \$300 million for the Ukrainian Security Assistance Initiative for fiscal years 2024 and 2025, while also extending the Initiative until the end of 2026.⁵⁰ The USAI is notably meant to fund the federal government to pay relevant industries directly to produce weapons and security assistance for Ukraine, as opposed to providing Ukraine with assistance from the US's existing stockpiles.⁵¹

Drone footage reportedly taken from western Zaporizhia Oblast shows Russian forces using Ukrainian prisoners of war (POWs) as human shields in an apparent violation of international humanitarian law. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* stated on December 13 that it received drone footage from Ukraine that shows Russian soldiers covering themselves behind Ukrainian POWs as they advance on Ukrainian positions near Robotyne.⁵² The Ukrainian POWs in the video appear unarmed, while the Russian soldiers force them forward at gunpoint, and at some point, a Russian soldier fires at and apparently kills the Ukrainian POW as the POW tries to run away.⁵³ *RFE/RL* noted that elements of the 234th Airborne Assault (VDV) Regiment (76th VDV Division) are active in the Robotyne area, suggesting that the command of this regiment would be responsible for the apparent violations of international humanitarian law.⁵⁴ The Ukrainian Prosecutor General's Office initiated criminal proceedings on the “violation of laws and customs of war” based on the video.⁵⁵ Ukrainian Human Rights Ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets responded to the video and called it an apparent violation of the Geneva Convention.⁵⁶ The Geneva Conventions prohibit the use of “protected persons” as human shields to protect against attacks or “prevent reprisals during an offensive,” and POWs are specifically classified as protected persons under international law.⁵⁷

Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes against port infrastructure in southern Ukraine on the night of December 13-14. Ukraine's Air Force reported on December 14 that Russian forces launched 42 Shahed-136/131s mainly at port infrastructure in Odesa Oblast from the directions of Balaklava and Chauda, occupied Crimea, as well as Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai.⁵⁸ Ukrainian military sources reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 41 of the 42 Shaheds--32 Shaheds over Odesa Oblast, two over Kherson Oblast, and five over Mykolaiv Oblast.⁵⁹ The Romanian Ministry of Defense also noted that one drone fell on an uninhabited area near Grindu, a small settlement in Romania on the Ukraine-Romania border.⁶⁰ Ukrainian military sources also stated that Russian forces fired six S-300 missiles from occupied Kherson Oblast at areas in Mykolaiv and Kherson oblasts in tandem with the wave of Shahed launches.⁶¹

Ardent Russian ultranationalist and former Russian officer Igor Girkin went on trial and pled not guilty to extremist charges in Moscow City Court on December 14.⁶² Girkin's lawyer, Gadzi Aliyer, stated that the trial was adjourned until December 20 after the Moscow Court read Girkin his charges and heard his plea on December 14.⁶³ Girkin's other lawyer, Alexander Molokhov, told Russian opposition outlet *Sota* that Girkin testified about making an “emotional comment” after reading a complaint on May 25, 2022, which claimed that mobilized Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) personnel did not receive compensation for their service.⁶⁴ Girkin's comment read as follows: “citizens, it is not enough to shoot [officials] for something like this [lack of compensation for mobilized DNR personnel].” Girkin testified that this comment, which became the

official reason for his criminal charge, was a figurative expression that was not meant to be taken literally. Girkin added that Russia needed to launch the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2014, that Russia is fighting against the West, and that Russia needs to announce a country-wide martial law instead of freezing the war.⁶⁵

Chairman of the Girkin-led “Angry Patriots Club” Pavel Gubarev publicly denounced Girkin on December 13, a day prior to Girkin’s first trial hearing. Gubarev had previously vaguely implied that he had a conflict with Girkin in September following Girkin’s arrest and announcement of his intent to run for president but has refrained from renouncing his ties with him.⁶⁶ Gubarev called Girkin a “lying hypocritical vile schemer and nonentity” on December 13 and claimed that he will release an essay exposing Girkin in the coming days.⁶⁷ Gubarev compared Girkin’s arrest to the political arrests of Belarusian opposition leaders and doubled down on his previous claims that the Kremlin imprisoned Girkin over his presidential ambitions.⁶⁸ Gubarev claimed that he intends to shatter the public perception of Girkin as a “noble principled warrior and hero” and expose him for being a myth in the information space and a psychopathic personality. Several Russian milbloggers that support the “Angry Patriots Club” claimed that Gubarev’s statement further confirmed that people should not work with Girkin on political issues and denounced Girkin’s presidential ambitions.⁶⁹ One milblogger claimed that many people thought that Russian, Ukrainian, or Israeli security and intelligence agents published Gubarev’s rants, but noted that Gubarev’s statements are rooted in a personal conflict with Girkin.⁷⁰ While it is unclear what prompted Gubarev to denounce Girkin a day before his trial, this statement and these essays will likely further alienate Girkin’s supporters and damage Girkin’s reputation in the ultranationalist community.

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin displayed notable confidence in publicly discussing Russia’s war on Ukraine during a joint event combining his annual press conference and “Direct Line” forum on December 14 but did not clearly define his envisioned end state for the full-scale invasion he launched on February 24, 2022.**
- **Putin reiterated his maximalist objectives for the Russian war in Ukraine, which are likely purposefully opaque to be inclusive of additional goals that Putin may seek to pursue now or later.**
- **These maximalist objectives also do not exclude Russia’s annexation of occupied Ukrainian territories or additional territorial conquests.**
- **Putin attempted to rhetorically contextualize Russia’s continued maximalist objectives in Ukraine within the wider conception of Russian “sovereignty,” an ideological line that has been consistent in the Kremlin’s framing of Russian national security and foreign policy since before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.**
- **Putin claimed that the Russian force grouping in Ukraine is far larger than even Russian officials have characterized, likely in an attempt to both address persistent Russian concerns about a new mobilization wave and to demoralize the West and Ukraine.**
- **The difference in the reported numbers of Russian personnel involved in the war is likely due to different categorizations of Russian military personnel and does not reflect a significant increase in Russian personnel on the frontline, which Ukrainian forces have consistently been repelling.**
- **Putin notably addressed the tactical and operational situation in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast but refrained from discussing active Russian offensive operations in eastern Ukraine.**
- **Putin’s public discussions about issues at the front and about the Russian war effort in general may redirect public anger about problems in the war toward the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD).**
- **Putin also attempted to convince the Russian public that the Russian economy is resilient in the face of international sanctions and the fallout of the war in Ukraine.**

- **Putin continued to express an increasingly anti-Israel position on the Israel-Hamas war, likely signaling a continuing decline in Russian-Israeli relations.**
- **Putin attempted to downplay deteriorating Armenian-Russian relations and extricate Russian peacekeeping forces from any responsibility for Armenia’s loss of Nagorno-Karabakh as Armenia appears to be effectively abstaining from participating in the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line, near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and advanced in some areas.**

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

- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on December 14 but did not make any confirmed gains. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces continued attacks in the direction of Kupyansk, particularly near Ivanivka (20km southeast of Kupyansk) and Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk).⁷¹ Geolocated footage posted on December 14 shows a Russian mechanized infantry attack in northern Synkivka.⁷² The Ukrainian General Staff reported unsuccessful Russian assaults in the Kupyansk direction near Synkivka and east of Petropavlivka (5km northeast of Kupyansk); and in the Kreminna direction east of Terny (15km west of Kreminna) and in the Serebryanske forest area (10km southwest of Kreminna).⁷³ Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted limited and unsuccessful counterattacks near Kupyansk and in the Kreminna area.⁷⁴

Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Bakhmut direction on December 14 and reportedly made unconfirmed gains. Several milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced southwest of Bakhmut near

Klishchiivka and northwest of Bakhmut on the outskirts of Bohdanivka.⁷⁵ One Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces have partially surrounded Klishchiivka.⁷⁶ Other milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are increasingly putting pressure on Ukrainian positions in the Vesele and Rozdolivka areas (both about 15km northeast of Bakhmut) in order to attack towards Siversk (about 30km northeast of Bakhmut).⁷⁷ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and other Russian sources amplified footage and reports that elements of the 83rd Air Assault (VDV) Brigade, 200th Motorized Rifle Brigade (Northern Fleet), and 85th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] Army Corps) are all operating in the Bakhmut area.⁷⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff reported unsuccessful Russian attacks southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka (7km southwest) and west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske (5km west).⁷⁹ The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled Ukrainian counterattacks near Klishchiivka.⁸⁰

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka direction on December 14 and have recently made a confirmed advance. Geolocated footage posted on December 14 shows that Russian forces advanced just south of the railway line that runs northwest of Stepove (about 7km northwest of Avdiivka).⁸¹ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are continuing heavy assaults near Stepove and are advancing along the railway line in the Stepove area.⁸² The spokesperson for a Ukrainian brigade deployed in the Avdiivka direction suggested that Russian forces are conducting particularly heavy assaults in the area between Stepove and the railway line and reported that Russian forces are struggling to remove the bodies of those killed in action from this area.⁸³ Russian milbloggers also claimed that Russian forces are gaining a foothold on the southeastern outskirts of Avdiivka, particularly along Kolosova Street, although ISW has not observed visual evidence of Russian forces operating on or near Kolosova Street.⁸⁴ The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Avdiivka itself, east of Novobakhmutivka (13km northwest of Avdiivka), south of Sieverne (5km west of Avdiivka), and near Pervomaiske (10km southwest of Avdiivka) and Nevelske (13km southwest of Avdiivka).⁸⁵

Russian forces continued offensive operations west and southwest of Donetsk City on December 14 and recently made a confirmed territorial gain. Geolocated footage posted on December 14 shows that Russian forces have made a marginal advance on the eastern outskirts of Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City).⁸⁶ Several Russian sources claimed that Russian forces have nearly completed the capture of Marinka (on the western outskirts of Donetsk City), except for a few houses on the northern outskirts of the settlement.⁸⁷ Russian sources additionally identified Pobieda (just south of Marinka) as the next Russian direction of advance.⁸⁸ The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces are holding Russian forces back near Krasnohorivka (on the western outskirts of Donetsk City) and Novomykhailivka.⁸⁹

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

Russian forces conducted limited ground attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on December 14 but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian troops repelled nine Russian attacks north of Pryyutne (15km southwest of Velyka Novosilka).⁹⁰ A Russian media aggregator claimed that there have been no significant changes on this frontline sector in the past day.⁹¹

Russian forces continued offensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 14 and reportedly recently made unconfirmed gains. Russian milbloggers claimed that units of Russia's Southern Military District advanced up to 2.5 kilometers wide and one kilometer deep west and south of Robotyne, pushed Ukrainian forces out of a tactically significant position, and advanced up to 700 meters near Verbove (9km east of Robotyne).⁹² ISW, however, has not observed any visual evidence of Russian gains near Robotyne or Verbove and reported on similar claims of Russian advances in both areas on December 13.⁹³ Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets noted that Russian forces are trying to restore lost positions between Novoprokopivka (just south of Robotyne) and Verbove using elements of the 58th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District) and 76th

Airborne (VDV) Division.⁹⁴ The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian attacks near Robotyne and west and northwest of Verbove.⁹⁵

Ukrainian forces continued ground operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on December 14. Russian milbloggers noted that Ukrainian forces are continuing "routine" fighting near the Krynky area (30km northeast of Kherson City and 2km from the Dnipro River).⁹⁶ Russian and Ukrainian sources noted that the newly formed 104th VDV Division is fighting near Krynky.⁹⁷

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to divert the blame for his decision to rely on and drastically expand Russian irregular armed formations amidst the full-scale invasion of Ukraine onto the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) during his joint "Direct Line" forum and press conference on December 14.⁹⁸ Putin responded to a question from a Russian combatant who appeared to wear a patch of the Russian "Veterany" irregular detachment, which is part of the "Redut" private military company (PMC) fighting in Ukraine.⁹⁹ The Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff (GRU) indirectly manages the "Redut" PMC as an irregular formation, and its troops are not entitled to state benefits offered to servicemen fighting in Ukraine as part of the Russian regular military.¹⁰⁰ The combatant told Putin that he and his comrades signed contracts with an unnamed PMC – likely implying Redut – but did not receive veteran status after fighting in Ukraine. Putin responded that the Russian MoD should not have let such issues emerge and reiterated that PMCs do not legally exist in Russia. Putin added that Russian law does not provide for PMC personnel and that PMC fighters technically sign contracts with the PMC rather than the state. Putin observed that PMCs compensate fighters in cash, which complicates the state's ability to account for these forces. Putin said that the Russian MoD and the Russian government are aware of these problems, and vaguely stated Russia would make changes to the law "if it is necessary" and "if it is impossible" to solve these problems.

Putin's comment on Russian PMCs is an indicator that the Kremlin remains committed to incentivizing volunteer recruitment into irregular formations rather than launching another mobilization wave in the immediate future. The Kremlin has consistently relied on irregular formations to support its war effort in Ukraine without upsetting Russian society with another mobilization campaign and had likely hoped that the extent of these irregular formations (which have dramatically expanded as a result of a volunteer recruitment campaign) would remain concealed from the Russian public. Deceased Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin and his network in the Russian information space destroyed the Kremlin's efforts to conceal its use of irregular forces after Prigozhin began to publicly call on the Kremlin to legally recognize irregular forces.¹⁰¹ Putin's "Direct Line" is a highly scripted event, and the Kremlin had likely deliberately included this discussion to acknowledge growing public concerns over the lack of state compensation for irregular formations in an effort to regain control over the narrative and ensure that Russia can continue recruiting volunteers in this way. Putin's delegation of this issue to the Russian MoD also creates favorable rhetorical conditions to justify the ongoing irregular force formalization campaign as the state's effort to compensate and account for all irregular forces, instead of acknowledging its actual objective of restoring the Kremlin's control over irregular formations following the Wagner mutiny.

Putin also stated that Russia needs a "special organ, not just the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD)" to address issues with migration to Russia, likely as part of increasing efforts to restrict migrant activity in Russia and to coerce migrants into Russian military service.¹⁰² Putin stated that there are over 10 million migrants in Russia and that Russia continues to need their labor but emphasized the importance of prioritizing Russian citizens' needs.¹⁰³ Putin also reiterated his support for Russifying migrants in Russia and citizens of post-Soviet countries through the establishment of Russian and Russian-speaking educational institutions abroad.¹⁰⁴

Russian Technological Adaptations (Russian objective: Introduce technological innovations to optimize systems for use in Ukraine)

The Institute of Science and International Security (ISIS) observed that a Russian economic zone tasked with the production of Shahed drones in the Republic of Tatarstan is installing additional security and building new infrastructure likely in an effort to expand Russia's drone production.¹⁰⁵ The *Washington Post* previously found that Russian companies operating within the "Alabuga" Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in Tatarstan were working on changing the design of the Iranian Shahed-136 drones and were planning to produce 6,000 such drones by summer 2025.¹⁰⁶ ISIS observed ongoing construction work in the Alabuga SEZ, the installation of a new external wall and barricades along roads, and the establishment of new checkpoints around the territory based on satellite imagery. ISIS assessed that this level of security indicates that the order to produce drones for the Russian military has "seriously changed the business strategy" for the Alabuga SEZ, which tried to attract foreign manufacturers of civilian goods before the war. ISIS experts also assessed that the observed construction activity is consistent with the proposed timetable for expanding production and reducing dependence on supplies from Iran. ISIS experts noted that leaked internal documents indicated that Alabuga began assembling Shahed drones from ready-made Iranian components in early 2023 and is now preparing to open its production lines.¹⁰⁷

Activities in Russian-occupied areas (Russian objective: Consolidate administrative control of annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian citizens into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russian authorities and occupation officials continue to establish programs aimed at indoctrinating Ukrainian youth into Russian cultural and national identities. Russian Minister of Culture Olga Lyubimova reportedly worked with Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) authorities to open a new children's center at the Stanytsiya-Luhanska Local Lore Museum aimed at teaching children about Russian history.¹⁰⁸ LNR authorities also advertised an opportunity for 260 people from occupied Ukraine to participate in the "It's Our Family" Festival and competition, which is part of the International Exhibition and Forum in Moscow.¹⁰⁹ The "It's Our Family" Festival is reportedly part of a wider educational program likely aimed at promoting Russian historical and educational narratives.

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

The Kremlin continued to push an information operation that Ukraine would have no choice but to surrender to Russia's maximalist demands if the West ceased military aid provision to Ukraine and revitalized its "red line" narrative, which it routinely promoted immediately before launching a full-scale invasion. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed on December 13 that the military and political situation is becoming more disadvantageous for Ukraine and that the "Kyiv regime knows really well" what it needs to do to resolve this situation.¹¹⁰ Peskov added that Ukrainian officials also are very familiar with where Ukraine "crossed the red lines." Peskov's explicit use of the "red lines" framework is a direct callback to the ultimatum rhetoric in late 2021 and early 2022 that the Kremlin used to try to coerce the West into sacrificing Ukraine's sovereignty and to create conditions for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹¹¹ Peskov's statement likely seeks to blame Ukraine for not negotiating on Russia's extremist terms to decisively align itself with Russia and deprive itself of its sovereign right freely to choose its own alliances and partnerships – a core demand that the Kremlin pushed in its ultimatums in late 2021. ISW assessed on December 13 that the Kremlin began to increasingly push information operations that discuss Ukraine's borders and territories to cajole the international community into abandoning key components of Ukraine's sovereignty: its territorial integrity as defined in 1991 and its right to form alliances and international partnerships of its choosing.¹¹²

The Kremlin is additionally pushing an information operation that aims to transform what had been personalized attacks on Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and the current Ukrainian leadership into generalized

attacks on any pro-Western Ukrainian government. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova implied on December 12 that the replacement of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky by the West – the whole notion of which is entirely a Russian information operation - will not ultimately “change the situation in the Ukrainian conflict” because Ukrainian officials are not “independent” figures and are Western “puppets.”¹¹³ The narrative that Ukraine is a Western “puppet-state” is standard for the Kremlin, but the evolving narrative that started with bizarre Russian claims that the West was preparing to replace Zelensky is now setting conditions for Russia to reject the legitimacy of any Ukrainian government that is not pro-Russian. The Kremlin’s propaganda often falsely framed Zelensky as the current instigator of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the new information campaign will support Kremlin efforts to insist on its right to determine which Ukrainian government is an acceptable partner with which to negotiate.¹¹⁴

Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko met with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states’ intelligence and security agency heads on December 14. Lukashenko reiterated the Russian information operation that alleged that Ukrainian discrimination against ethnic Russians in Ukraine forced Russia to invade Ukraine in order to “protect [its] people” and that Russia is willing to engage in legitimate peace negotiations with Ukraine.¹¹⁵ Lukashenko also reiterated Russian narratives aimed at exacerbating alleged tensions between Ukrainian political and military leaders.¹¹⁶

Note: ISW does not receive any classified material from any source, uses only publicly available information, and draws extensively on Russian, Ukrainian, and Western reporting and social media as well as commercially available satellite imagery and other geospatial data as the basis for these reports. References to all sources used are provided in the endnotes of each update.

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