

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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Click <u>here</u> to see ISW's interactive map of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This map is updated daily alongside the static maps present in this report.

Click <u>here</u> 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 <u>here</u> 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 3:15pm ET on December 26 and covers both December 25 and December 26 due to the fact that ISW did not publish a Campaign Assessment on December 25 in observance of the Christmas holiday. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 27 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russia's likely capture of Marinka in Donetsk Oblast represents a limited Russian tactical gain and does not portend any operationally significant advance unless Russian forces have dramatically improved their ability to conduct rapid mechanized forward movement, which they show no signs of having done. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 25 and claimed that Russian forces completely captured Marinka (immediately west of Donetsk City). Ukrainian Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi stated on December 26 that combat has effectively destroyed Marinka, acknowledged that Ukrainian forces withdrew in part from Marinka, and stated that Ukrainian forces nonetheless are still operating in the northern outskirts of Marinka and have prepared a defensive line outside of the settlement.² Geolocated footage posted on December 25 indicates that Russian forces advanced in the northern sections of Marinka.³ ISW assesses that Russian forces likely control most if not all of Marinka despite not yet observing visual confirmation of the complete Russian capture of Marinka as of December 26. Putin claimed that the Russian capture of Marinka will allow Russian forces to push Ukrainian combat units away from occupied Donetsk City and create a wider operational space for Russian forces.4 Many Russian milbloggers acknowledged the capture of Marinka as a tactical victory and claimed that it will allow Russian forces to conduct offensive operations toward settlements up to 15km west of Marinka in the coming weeks and months, threatening nearby Ukrainian ground lines of communication (GLOCs).5 Russian forces have attempted to capture Marinka since 2014 and have been conducting daily frontal assaults on the settlement since the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, intensifying those assaults starting in early October 2023.6 Both Russian and Ukrainian officials have acknowledged that fighting has completely destroyed Marinka, a small settlement with a pre-invasion population of roughly 9,000.7

A small and completely destroyed settlement does not offer Russian forces a secure operational foothold from which to launch further offensive operations. Marinka is located less than a kilometer from the pre-invasion frontline and Ukrainian forces have long fortified many of the surrounding settlements, which Russian forces have been similarly struggling to capture.⁸ Russian forces have advanced roughly over three kilometers in depth into Marinka since February 24, 2022, and there are no indications that the rate of Russian advance to the next

settlements identified as tactical Russian objectives will be any quicker, especially considering the rate of attrition that Russian forces suffered to capture a small settlement directly on the border of territory Russia has controlled since 2014. Russia's capture of Marinka follows several months of highly attritional marginal gains and is not the result of a sudden rapid mechanized Russian advance. Russian forces have not conducted any offensive operation that resulted in a rapid and mechanized forward advance since Spring 2022, and Russian capabilities to conduct the mechanized maneuver that would be required for such an advance have been severely degraded. Russian forces have recently illustrated the lack of these capabilities in failed waves of mass mechanized assaults to capture Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, and those offensive operations resulted in further armored vehicle losses that have prompted the Russian command to transition to infantry-heavy ground attacks. Rapid maneuver warfare also requires combat effective mechanized units, and the Russian units that have participated in the effort to capture Marinka have largely been elements of poorly trained and less effective Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) units. Russian forces are highly unlikely to make rapid operational advances from Marinka, and the reported Russian capture of the settlement at most sets conditions for further limited tactical gains.

Localized Russian offensive operations are still placing pressure on Ukrainian forces in many places along the front in eastern Ukraine, however, and can result in gradual tactical Russian advances. Zaluzhnyi stated that holding Ukrainian territory is important but that Ukrainian forces are prioritizing the preservation of their personnel. 12 Zaluzhnyi added that he believes that Russian forces can repeat 'what happened in Bakhmut" (using high-casualty frontal attacks to force tactical gains over a protracted period) in Avdiivka in the next two to three months, which would force Ukrainian forces to retreat to save their personnel and retake the settlement at a later date. 13 Russian forces captured Bakhmut in May 2023 after months of gradual tactical gains during the Wagner Group's infantry-heavy urban offensive operation to capture the city, which resulted in staggering Russian losses including the effective destruction of the Wagner Group following the abortive armed mutiny that those losses precipitated. 14 Russian forces are conducting similarly attritional ground assaults in localized offensive operations throughout eastern Ukraine, although not at the scale that Wagner did during the battle for Bakhmut. These Russian offensive operations will continue to pressure defending Ukrainian forces and produce limited tactical gains. The accumulation of marginal Russian gains amid continued heavy fighting may produce tactical scenarios wherein the Ukrainian command may choose to withdraw forces from endangered positions of limited operational significance if it determines that the preservation of personnel is more expedient.

Ukrainian forces conducted a successful missile strike that destroyed a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessel and potentially damaged port infrastructure in occupied Feodosia, Crimea on **December 26.** Ukrainian military officials reported that Ukrainian air force aircraft conducted a strike on the BSF's Novocherkassk Ropucha-class landing ship in occupied Feodosia with unspecified cruise missiles. 15 Geolocated footage from the strike shows that Ukrainian forces struck the Novocherkassk, causing most of it to burn and sink.¹⁶ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that the *Novocherkassk* suffered "damage" while "repelling" a Ukrainian strike. ¹⁷ Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 26 that the Ukrainian strike possibly also damaged surrounding port infrastructure and other nearby Russian support vessels.¹⁸ Ihnat noted that the only missiles that Ukrainian forces possess that are capable of conducting long-range strikes are SCALP and Storm Shadow missiles, heavily insinuating that one or the other of these kinds of missiles were used in the strike. 19 Ihnat also stated that Russian forces continue to use various short, medium, and long-range air defense systems and that Ukrainian pilots employ specific tactical techniques to ensure the maximum number of strikes reach their target.²⁰ A Russian milblogger claimed that units of the 31st Air Defense Division, which are operating S-400 air defense systems in Feodosia, failed to identify two Ukrainian cruise missiles.21 United Kingdom Defense Secretary Grant Schapps stated that Ukrainian forces have destroyed 20 percent of the BSF over the past four months.²² ISW continues to assess that Ukrainian strikes on BSF assets have forced the Russian military to move BSF assets to the eastern part of the Black Sea on an enduring basis.²³

Russian forces struck a train station in Kherson City where civilians were waiting for evacuation on December 26.24 Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated in his nightly address on December 26 that Russian forces struck a railway station in Kherson City, and Ukrainian Minister of Internal Affairs Ihor Klymenko clarified that Russian forces began shelling the railway station as 140 civilians were awaiting departure onboard an evacuation train.25 Ukrainian media posted footage depicting the destruction in the aftermath of the strike and reported that the shelling killed at least one and wounded four.26

Russian forces conducted additional waves of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the nights of December 24-25 and December 25-26. Ukrainian military sources reported that overnight on December 24-25, Russian forces launched 31 Shahed-131/136 drones at Ukraine from Cape Chauda and Balaklava, occupied Crimea, a Kh-59 missile from the Zaporizhia Oblast direction, and a Kh-31P anti-radar missile from the direction of the Black Sea.²⁷ Ukrainian forces destroyed 28 of the Shaheds and both of the missiles.²⁸ Ukrainian military sources then reported on December 26 that overnight on December 25-26 Russian forces launched 19 Shahed drones from Balaklava and Primorsko-Akhtarsk, Krasnodar Krai, at Ukraine, 13 of which Ukrainian forces shot down over Odesa, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Khmelnytskyi oblasts.²⁹ Ukraine's Southern Operational Command noted that Russian forces struck an infrastructure object in Odesa Oblast and an industrial facility in Mykolaiv Oblast.³⁰

Russian forces have reportedly decreased the tempo of their operations on east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, likely in connection with decreasing Russian aviation activity after Ukrainian forces recently shot down several Russian aircraft. Ukrainian military officials reported on December 24 and 25 that Ukrainian forces shot down one Russian Su-34 aircraft in the Mariupol direction and one Russian Su-30SM over the Black Sea in addition to the three Su-34 aircraft that Ukrainian forces shot down over southern Ukraine between December 21 and 22.31 Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated on December 26 that Russian forces on the east bank Kherson Oblast are conducting half as many ground attacks against Ukrainian positions per day in comparison to the previous average of 30 assaults daily,³² Humenyuk also reported that the destruction of several Russian aircraft has weakened Russian forces' ability to conduct glide bomb strikes and that Russian forces have deployed highcaliber artillery and multiple launch rocket systems (MLRS) to east bank Kherson Oblast in order to compensate for a lack of aviation support.³³ Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat reported on December 25 that Russian forces stopped conducting active hostilities in the Kherson direction after Ukrainian forces shot down three Russian Su-34 aircraft in southern Ukraine.34 A Russian milblogger claimed on December 25 that Russian aviation in Kherson Oblast has not been operating for the past three days due to the destruction of Russian Su-34 aircraft.³⁵ Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on December 26 that the Russian military has not been able to restore its number of Su-34/34M aircraft to its pre-full-scale invasion amount and now must supplement Su-34/34M aircraft operations with the older Su-24 aircraft.³⁶ Mashovets reported that Russian forces rarely deploy Su-34/34M aircraft to Russian bases in occupied Crimea, likely in an attempt to keep them out of Ukrainian strike range.³⁷ ISW previously assessed that Russian forces may have recently intensified their use of glide bombs against Ukrainian forces on west (right) bank Kherson Oblast in part due to Ukrainian forces' successful suppression of Russian long-range artillery.³⁸ Russian forces may currently be opting to bring long-range artillery closer to the Dnipro River shoreline rather than risk the destruction of more aircraft, however. The potential deployment of Russian long-range artillery closer to the frontline may present an opportunity for Ukrainian forces to more easily target Russian long-range artillery systems and operate more freely and safely along the Dnipro River coast and in rear areas in west bank Kherson Oblast.

The Ukrainian government continues efforts to systematize and increase the sustainability of Ukrainian mobilization over the long term. The Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers submitted a set of proposed amendments to Ukraine's mobilization, military registration, and military service laws on December 25, which include provisions to lower the conscription age for mobilization from 27 to 25 years old, discharge servicemen after they serve for 36 months provided there is no Ukrainian manpower crisis or a major escalation on the battlefield, and allow servicemen to rotate from the front every six months.³⁹ Ukrainian Commander-in-

Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi noted the complexity of legislating mobilization and service requirements during wartime on December 26, stating that war develops according to its own laws and that the situation along the front is dependent on the Russian military's actions.⁴⁰ Zaluzhnyi added that Ukraine cannot predict what the war will look like in five to six months.⁴¹

Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to portray himself as a gracious Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, while contrasting his apparent attention to the Russian with the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) incompetence. Putin irregular forces' demonstratively ordered Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on December 25 to promote a Russian volunteer, Senior Lieutenant Alexander Troshin, to the rank of major for his efforts in fighting for Marinka (west of Donetsk City) - allowing Troshin to bypass the rank of captain.⁴² Prior to the order, Putin asked Shoigu if he had any suggestions on how to best award Troshin, to which Shoigu responded that the only rank he can offer him is the rank of captain despite the fact that Troshin is a commander of a tank battalion – a role usually occupied by lieutenant colonels. Shoigu stated that although Troshin is a successful fighter and joined the war effort as a volunteer rather than a as an officer, the military command cannot promote him to a higher rank because of a presidential decree that prohibits such a promotion. Putin said that he is aware of the military service regulation on ranks but noted that "this regulation is approved by the presidential decree, so the president has the right to amend this regulation." Putin notably ignored the regulation rather than amending it, however, suggesting that he sees himself not merely as the lawgiver but also as above the law. Putin concluded this discussion by stating that the Russian military command should support fighters like Troshin who want to become professional servicemen – likely in reference to those who want to become contract servicemen (kontrakniki) within the Russian Armed Forces. Putin's discussion with Shoigu made it seem as though Putin was indirectly blaming Shoigu for failing to change the structure of the Russian Armed Forces to accommodate the new class of Russian servicemen – the volunteers (dobrovoltsy). Russian milbloggers have consistently complained that the Russian command does not higher ranks to dobrovoltsy despite their combat experience, instead reserve these ranks for Russian professional servicemen.⁴³ Putin's statement is likely part of an ongoing effort to blame the Russian MoD and the Russian General Staff for failing to address dobrovoltsu's concerns. while presenting himself as an involved war-time leader who is actively working on resolving these disparities.44 Putin's recent focus on defining and interacting with Russian irregular volunteer formations may also be indicative of Russia's formalization efforts and possible integration of dobrovoltsy as a new but separate class of forces within the Russian Armed Forces.

Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states met during a series of meetings in St. Petersburg on December 25 and 26. The EAEU signed a full-scale trade agreement with Iran during on December 25, replacing the temporary agreement approved in 2019.⁴⁵ Armenian President Nikol Pashinyan notably attended the meeting after refraining from attending equivalent Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) events for the past several months against the backdrop of deteriorating Russian-Armenian relations.⁴⁶ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov stated that Pashinyan and Russian President Vladimir Putin would have a "great opportunity" to speak during the meetings, and Putin was later pictured chatting with Pashinyan on December 26.⁴⁷

Russian actors seized on ongoing protests in Serbia against Serbian President Alexander Vucic to blame Western actors for causing instability in Serbia, which Russia perceives as a long-term European ally. Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov claimed that unspecified "third parties," including from aboard, are attempting to provoke unrest in Serbia. Russian sources, including Russian Ambassador to Serbia Alexander Bocan-Harchenko, accused the West of attempting to overthrow Serbia's government and pursuing a "Maidan scenario," referring to Ukraine's 2014 Euromaidan Revolution, which resulted in the removal of pro-Kremlin President Viktor Yanukovych and which the Kremlin has consistently falsely characterized as a Western hybrid war against Russia. The Russian information space will likely continue to exploit protests in Serbia to drive a wedge between Serbia and the West.

A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Finland is becoming a "second Ukraine," creating rhetorical parallels between Russian narratives about Ukraine and Finland, and further suggesting that Russia maintains future ideological and territorial objectives that far exceed the war in Ukraine. The milblogger claimed on December 26 that the US now has access to a total of 35 military bases in Finland, Sweden, and Denmark, including a Finnish base that is 137km from the Russian border.⁵⁰ The US has recently signed defense cooperation agreements with both Finland and Sweden that grant America troops access to 15 military installations in Finland and 17 in Sweden.⁵¹ The milblogger additionally claimed that Finland is becoming a "second Ukraine" due to the purported prominence of Finnish neo-Nazi organizations and the alleged rise of Finnish nationalist movements, such as the Karelian National Battalion.⁵² The milblogger's invocation of the concepts of neo-Nazism and nationalism echo some of the major ideological justifications that the Kremlin has used to support its invasion of Ukraine, as ISW has previously reported.⁵³ Russia has recently undertaken several measures to posture against Finland militarily, namely through the recreation of the Leningrad Military District (LMD), which will have an area of operation largely along the Russo-Finnish border.⁵⁴ ISW has frequently assessed that Russia maintains maximalist aims in Ukraine.⁵⁵ The increasingly aggressive Russian rhetorical and military posturing towards Finland suggests that Russia maintains expansive goals beyond the battlefield in Ukraine, which is particularly relevant due to Finland's recent accession to NATO.56 ISW does not assess that Russia has the current military capacity or intent to threaten Finland or any NATO member militarily at this time, but rhetoric setting conditions for future threats and tensions with NATO members is cause for concern about Russia's long-term aims.

Key Takeaways:

- Russia's likely capture of Marinka in Donetsk Oblast represents a limited Russian tactical gain
 and does not portend any operationally significant advance unless Russian forces have
 dramatically improved their ability to conduct rapid mechanized forward movement, which
 they show no signs of having done.
- Localized Russian offensive operations are still placing pressure on Ukrainian forces in many places along the front in eastern Ukraine, however, and can result in gradual tactical Russian advances.
- Ukrainian forces conducted a successful missile strike that destroyed a Russian Black Sea Fleet (BSF) vessel and potentially damaged port infrastructure in occupied Feodosia, Crimea on December 26.
- Russian forces struck a train station in Kherson City where civilians were waiting for evacuation on December 26.
- Russian forces have reportedly decreased the tempo of their operations on east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, likely in connection with decreasing Russian aviation activity after Ukrainian forces recently shot down several Russian aircraft.
- The Ukrainian government continues efforts to systematize and increase the sustainability of Ukrainian mobilization over the long term.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin continued to portray himself as a gracious Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Armed Forces, while contrasting his apparent attention to the Russian irregular forces' with the Russian Ministry of Defense's (MoD) incompetence.
- Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) member states met during a series of meetings in St. Petersburg on December 25 and 26.
- Russian actors seized on ongoing protests in Serbia against Serbian President Alexander Vucic to blame Western actors for causing instability in Serbia, which Russia perceives as a long-term European ally.
- A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger claimed that Finland is becoming a "second Ukraine," creating rhetorical parallels between Russian narratives about Ukraine and Finland, further suggesting that Russia maintains future ideological and territorial objectives that far exceed the war in Ukraine.

- Russian forces made confirmed advances near Kupyansk, Avdiivka, Marinka, and Robotyne as positional engagements continued along the entire line of contact.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a series of laws on December 25 to help further bolster Russia's force generation capacity.
- The Kremlin further formalized avenues to coerce residents of occupied Ukraine to receive Russian passports using maternity capital payments.

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

NOTE: ISW has restructured the operational kinetic axis sections of the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to more accurately reflect the positional nature of fighting on the battlefield. Operational kinetic axis paragraphs will be shorter and more synthetic to convey the same assessment in fewer words and not to overwhelm the reader with long lists of settlement names. The level of detail included in the report has not decreased. The report's endnotes still contain the same level of sourcing, and ISW encourages readers interested in tactical granular details to read them. ISW will explicitly flag major operational inflections in axis text as usual, so the lack of named settlements should not be taken as an indication of gains or losses of territory or changes in the frontline. ISW will lead operational axes with confirmed map changes to accord with the daily map products produced by the Geospatial Intelligence Team, supplemented by Ukrainian and Russian claims, and will also list order of battle (ORBAT) details in each axis section when available.

Russian Main Effort - Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance near Kupyansk. Geolocated footage published on December 24 indicates that Russian force marginally advanced southwest of Pershotravneve (northeast of Kupyansk).⁵⁷ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces are three kilometers away from Terny, although ISW continues to assess that Russian forces are about four kilometers away from the outskirts of Terny.⁵⁸ Russian milbloggers claimed that elements of the Chechen "Akhmat" Spetsnaz and 2nd Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) Army Corps renewed offensive operations near the Serebryanske forest area (southwest of Kreminna) on December 25.⁵⁹

Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional engagements continued in the Kupyansk direction northeast of Petropavlivka, near Synkivka, Stelmakhivka (northwest of Svatove), and Novoselivske (northwest of Svatove), and in the Lyman direction near Hryhorivka (southwest of Kreminna), Torske, the Serebryanske forest area, Dibrova, and Bilohorivka (south of Kreminna). Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported that elements of the Russian 27th Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Guards Tank Army [GTA], Western Military District [WMD]) and 1432nd Motorized Rifle Regiment (2nd Motorized Rifle Division, 1st GTA, WMD) have been unsuccessfully attacking along the Kuzemivka-Stelmakhivka line (northwest of Svatove) for the past several days. Mashovets reported that Russian forces recently deployed more artillery elements of the 9th Artillery Brigade (6th Combined Arms Army [CAA], WMD) near Tavilzhanka (northeast of Kupyansk) in order to support units of the Russian 25th Motorized Rifle Brigade (6th CAA, WMD) attacking near Synkivka.

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

Russian forces reportedly attacked near Vesele (20km northeast of Bakhmut) on December 25 but did not advance. ⁶³ Elements of the 6th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People's Republic [LNR] Army Corps [AC]) are reportedly continuing to operate northeast of Bakhmut near Spirne. ⁶⁴

Russian sources claimed on December 25 and December 26 that Russian forces marginally advanced west and southwest of Bakhmut, but ISW has not observed evidence confirming these claims. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces captured the Chornobylets gardening community southwest of Bakhmut and the cemetery northwest of Khromove (west of Bakhmut), and advanced along a road southwest of Khromove. Russian sources claimed that Russian forces advanced up to 500 meters in depth within Bohdanivka (northwest of Bakhmut) and control 40 percent of the settlement. Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly fought positional battles northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka; southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka; and west of Bakhmut near Ivanivske and the To504 Khromove-Chasiv Yar highway. Ukrainian Spokesperson for the 42nd Separate Mechanized Brigade Junior Lieutenant Vadym Ivashchenko reported on December 25 that Russian forces are using tear gas and some other unspecified chemical weapons to push Ukrainian forces out of their positions in the Bakhmut direction.

Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets noted that the Russian military command deployed elements of the Russian "Plamya" Separate Reconnaissance and Assault Detachment (Volunteer Assault Corps) northwest of Bakhmut to the Berkhivka-Bohadanivka line. Mashovets added that the Russian military command deployed seven total separate volunteer reconnaissance and assault brigades and nine separate reconnaissance and assault detachments of the Russian Volunteer Assault Corps to the Bakhmut direction but observed that these units are unlikely to be fully staffed or have doctrinally-sound structures. Elements of the Russian 78th Motorized Rifle "Sever Akhmat" Regiment (42nd Guards Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Southern Military District [SMD]) are reportedly operating near Klishchiivka; elements of the 106th Guards Airborne (VDV) Division and 98th Guards VDV Division are reportedly operating in the Bakhmut direction; elements of the irregular "Volki" volunteer detachment are reportedly operating in the Bakhmut-Soledar direction; and elements of the "Sever-V" Brigade (Volunteer Assault Corps) and 200th Motorized Rifle Brigade (14th AC, Northern Fleet) are reportedly operating in the Chasiv Yar direction west of Bakhmut.

Ukrainian forces reportedly unsuccessfully attacked Russian positions in the Horlivka direction on December 25 and on December 26. Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked near Shumy (9km northwest of Horlivka) and unsuccessfully attempted to capture Russian positions one of Horlivka's waste heaps.⁷¹

Russian forces recently made confirmed marginal advances northwest, southwest, and southeast of Avdiivka. Geolocated footage published on December 25 and December 26 indicates that Russian forces advanced in northern Stepove (northwest of Avdiivka), on the northern outskirts of Opytne (southwest of Avdiivka), and in the industrial area southeast of Avdiivka.⁷² Russian sources claimed that Russian forces advanced 300 meters

along the railway towards Ocheretyne (northwest of Avdiivka), up to 100 meters on the eastern outskirts of Stepove, up to 200 meters southeast of Nevelske (southwest of Avdiivka), and several hundred meters near Novokalynove (northwest of Avdiivka), although ISW has not observed visual evidence of these claims.⁷³ Russian and Ukrainian forces reportedly continued positional engagements near Avdiivka; northwest of Avdiivka near the Avdiivka Coke Plant, east of Novobakhmutivka, and near Stepove and Ocheretyne; in the industrial zone; and southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske, Nevelske, and Sieverne.⁷⁴ Ukrainian Spokesperson of the 47th Mechanized Brigade Dmytro Lazutkin stated that the situation in the Avdiivka direction is not getting any easier but noted that Russian advances are marginal around Avdiivka.⁷⁵

Geolocated footage and Ukrainian and Russian official statements suggest that Russian forces have taken control of much if not all of Marinka.⁷⁶ Fighting reportedly continued west and northwest of Marinka and southwest of Donetsk City near Novomykahilivka and Pobieda.⁷⁷ A Russian milblogger claimed that elements of the Russian 103rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (150th Motorized Rifle Division, 8th CAA, SMD) pushed Ukrainian forces out of their positions to the left of the road to Heorhiivka (southwest of Donetsk City).⁷⁸ Russian sources credited elements of the Russian 150th Motorized Rifle Division, 5th Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Donetsk People's Republic's [DNR] AC), 20th Guards Motorized Rifle Division (8th CAA, SMD), 42nd Motorized Rifle Division (58th CAA, SMD), "Akhmat-Sila" detachment, and DNR's "Donetsk-Kuzbass" company with seizing Marinka.⁷⁹ Elements of the Russian 33rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (20th Guards Motorized Rifle Division, 8th CAA, SMD) and 11th Air Force and Air Defense Army (Aerospace Forces) are reportedly operating in the Novomykhailivka direction.⁸⁰

Russian sources claimed that Russian forces downed two Ukrainian missiles over occupied Mariupol on December 26.81 Ukrainian Mariupol Mayor's Advisor Petro Andryushchenko reported that Russian forces are likely trying to install air defense systems in Mariupol.82

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

Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional engagements continued near Staromayorske (south of Velyka Novosilka) and north of Pryyutne (southwest of Velyka Novosilka) in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on December 25 and 26.83 Elements of the Russian 394th Motorized Rifle Regiment (127th Motorized Rifle Division, 5th Combined Arms Army, Eastern Military District) are reportedly operating near Staromayorske.84

Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance in western Zaporizhia Oblast and continued positional engagements with Ukrainian forces on December 25 and 26. Geolocated footage published on December 25 indicates that Russian forces recently advanced northwest of Robotyne. A Russian milblogger claimed on December 26 that Russian forces advanced south of Kamianske (30km southwest of Orikhiv), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional fighting occurred south of Hulyaipole (37km northeast of Orikhiv) and near Robotyne, Verbove (east of Robotyne), Novoprokopivka (south of Robotyne), and Kopani (northwest of Robotyne) on December 25 and 26. Elements of the Russian 247th Airborne (VDV) Regiment and the Chechen "Vostok-Akhmat" Battalion are reportedly operating near Verbove and Robotyne.

Ukrainian forces maintain positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast as of December 26, but neither Russian nor Ukrainian forces made confirmed gains in the area on December 25 or 26. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional engagements continued on the east bank, including near Krynky.⁸⁹

Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that Ukrainian forces continued to target rear Russian areas in southern Ukraine on December 25 and 26. Ukrainian sources stated that Russian air defense activated in response to Ukrainian drones near Berdyansk, Zaporizhia Oblast, on December 25 and that Ukrainian forces conducted

strikes near the settlement on December 26.90 Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces shot down two Ukrainian S-200 missiles near Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast.91

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a series of laws on December 25 to help further bolster Russia's force generation capacity. Putin signed laws allowing Rosgvardia to form its own volunteer formations, providing for the possibility of conscription service in the Federal Security Service (FSB), fining citizens who "discredit" Rosgvardia volunteers up to 100,000 rubles (approximately \$1,091), and allowing lawyers to file a complaint with the draft commission on behalf of conscripts. A Russian milblogger responded to the bill allowing Rosgvardia to form volunteer formations and suggested that the Russian government intends to use Rosgvardia personnel to maintain control in occupied Ukrainian cities in the future. Putin also signed a law that allows Russian military personnel fighting in Ukraine to defer loan payments until the end of 2024 and that forgives the debts of deceased or disabled military personnel.

Russia continues to signal concern over "NATO expansion" as it devotes assets to its Northern and Baltic fleets. Putin attended the presentation of colors ceremony in St. Petersburg for three new Russian warships – the *Admiral Golovko* Admiral Gorshkov-class frigate, the *Naro-Fominsk* Buyan-class small missile ship, and the *Lev Chernavin* Alexandrit-class minesweeper. Putin stated that the *Admiral Golovko* will join the Northern Fleet and that the *Naro-Fominsk* and *Lev Chernavin* will join the Baltic Fleet. Putin claimed that Russia's shipbuilding industry is "on the rise" and is working towards mass production of warships of various classes, and that the new ships will protect Russia's Western borders. Putin stated that Russia currently has five frigates, eight corvettes, 13 small missile ships, and more than 50 other ships of various classes in various stages of readiness. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu previously stated that the Russian military is reforming the Leningrad Military District (LMD) and Moscow Military District (MMD) in connection with Finland's accession to NATO and Sweden's upcoming accession.⁹⁶

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

Russian state-owned defense conglomerate Rostec reported on December 19 that its subsidiary, the Kalashnikov Concern, supplied the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) with the first batch of "Cube" strike drones. A Russian milblogger claimed on December 26 that the drone can carry more powerful warheads than other versions and can independently loiter over targets while waiting for the right moment to strike. The drone resembles the Iranian Shahed-model drone but is reportedly a short-range drone meant for near front line use.

Rostec subsidiary Instrument Design Bureau (KBP) Representative Alexander Shigin told Russian news outlet *TV Zvezda* on December 24 that KBP is developing a new, unspecified high-precision projectile with increase range and power based on the Krasnopol guided artillery system.¹⁰⁰

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

The Kremlin further formalized avenues to use maternity capital payments to coerce residents of occupied Ukraine to receive Russian passports. Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a law on December 25 that holds that parents will only receive maternity capital payments (a one-time state payment made to families for the birth or adoption of their second or third child) if the parents are Russian citizens at the time of the birth or

adoption and only if the child is a natural Russian citizen.¹º¹ The December 25 law is notably more stringent than the previous law on maternity capital, which did not require that the child be a natural Russian citizen.¹º² Kremlin newswire *TASS* noted that the new law will enter into force on January 1, 2024, and will not affect families living in occupied Ukraine who had children before Russia illegally annexed Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts—meaning that mothers of children born in these oblasts prior to their September 2022 illegal annexation will still be entitled to maternity capital payouts.¹º³ Russian occupation authorities will likely use this new maternity capital law to coerce families in occupied Ukraine to register their children for Russian passports at birth and to further coerce adult residents to receive Russian citizenship in order to be eligible for the payment. ISW has previously reported on the use of maternity capital and other social benefit payments by Russian occupation authorities to generate an increase in birth rates in occupied areas of Ukraine and to further integrate occupied areas into the Russian system.¹º⁴

Russian occupation authorities are importing labor from Russia for construction projects in occupied Ukraine. Independent Russian-language investigative outlet *Novaya Gazeta* reported on December 25 that over 7,000 construction workers from Moscow Oblast (including ethnic Russians, Belarusians, and Central Asian migrant workers) are currently working in occupied Mariupol, Donetsk Oblast with the Moscow Capital Repairs Fund. 105 Novaya Gazeta also noted that over 2,000 Russian workers were involved in reconstruction efforts in occupied Rubizhne, Luhansk Oblast, while others worked on schools in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast or on other construction projects elsewhere in occupied Donetsk Oblast. 106 Russian Minister for Construction, Housing, and Communal Services Irek Fayzullin indicated that 33,000 people from Russia are currently involved in construction programs in occupied Ukraine, over 50% of the total 60,000 builders working on such projects throughout occupied Ukraine. 107 Novaya Gazeta reported that Russian authorities are trying to attract higherquality workers to occupied Ukraine with the promise of higher salaries, leaving lower-quality and lessexperienced workers in Russia, which often leads to construction failures and the abandonment of construction projects in Russia. Russian occupation authorities are likely trying to attract Russian workers to occupied Ukraine in large part to resettle areas of occupied Ukraine with Russians—ISW previously has reported on Russian efforts to resettle Russians in large, occupied cities such as Mariupol using the promise of guaranteed employment, higher salaries, and preferential mortgages on housing. 108

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian sources continue to misrepresent new Ukrainian mobilization laws to further create social friction within Ukrainian society. The Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers submitted a bill to the Verkhnova Rada on December 25 proposing a set of changes to the existing laws on mobilization, military registration, and military service. Several Russian sources responded to the recent developments to claim that Ukraine is conducting a mass "shock" mobilization and falsely allege that Ukraine will mobilize wide swaths of the population, including women and disabled individuals. Some Russian milbloggers also called on Ukrainians to "arm themselves" in opposition to the new mobilization bill. Russian milbloggers also called on Ukrainians to "arm themselves" in developments in Ukrainian mobilization that are typical within a society that has been forced into a wartime footing to encourage dissatisfaction in Ukrainian society, while also ignoring the much more substantial resistance that Russians demonstrated in response to Russia's partial mobilization of reservists in September 2022, when over 700,000 Russians fled Russia to avoid mobilization.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov continues efforts to frame Russia as the leader of an alternative coalition of states that are a counterbalance to the collective West. Lavrov spoke at a meeting of the United Russia Party's general commission on December 26 and talked about Russia's ongoing efforts to form a broad "anti-neocolonial coalition" against the West, claiming that there is widespread international interest amongst non-Western nations to align with the Russia-centered BRICS format.¹¹³ The Kremlin has long framed efforts to counter the West as a fundamental part of its foreign policy.¹¹⁴

The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 25 that social media speculation about the death of 108 Ukrainian personnel operating in a brigade committed to the Avdiivka direction is false. ¹¹⁵ Russian sources amplified the speculation and claimed that the Ukrainian command is trying to hide losses from a significant Russian missile strike. ¹¹⁶ This Russian information operation likely aims to discredit Ukrainian commanders and demoralize the Ukrainian public.

Ukrainian officials reported on December 25 that Russian sources falsely claimed that Russian forces shot down a Ukrainian F-16 fighter jet near Odesa City. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command reported that Russian forces circulated a picture of a damaged F-16 as putative evidence but that in fact the picture was of a damaged F-16 involved in accident at an airfield in Belgium in 2018. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat added that F-16 fighter jets have yet to arrive in Ukraine and that Ukrainian forces are still training and preparing infrastructure ahead of receiving the aircraft. In the sum of the picture was of a damaged F-16 involved in accident at an airfield in Belgium in 2018. Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Colonel Yuriy Ihnat added that F-16 fighter jets have yet to arrive in Ukraine and that Ukrainian forces are still training and preparing infrastructure ahead of receiving the aircraft.

<u>Significant activity in Belarus</u> (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 stated on December 25 that Belarus has received and stored all Russian tactical nuclear weapons destined for deployment in Belarus following Russian deliveries to Belarus in September and October 2023. ¹²⁰ ISW continues to assess that the deployment of Russian tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus is part of a longstanding effort to cement Russia's *de facto* military control over Belarus and is highly unlikely to presage any Russian nuclear escalation. ¹²¹

Lukashenko met with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev at the meeting of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in St. Petersburg on December 26. Aliyev and Lukashenko reportedly discussed joint economic projects in the industrial, agricultural, construction, and defense sectors.¹²²

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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