

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment

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December 31, 2023, 5:10pm ET

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

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: ISW and CTP will not publish a campaign assessment (or maps) tomorrow, January 1, in observance of the New Year holiday. Coverage will resume on Tuesday, January 2.

Note: ISW previously reported that Russian occupation authorities were planning to create a new media conglomerate called "Mass Media of New Regions" in Russian-occupied Ukraine. ISW has corrected its assessment that Russian occupation authorities are seeking to develop and create a new focus called "Mass Media of New Regions," at the Tavrida Art Forum, where young cultural figures in occupied Ukraine can train and interact with Russian federal media platforms. ISW apologizes for this mistake.

Note: The data cut-off for this product was 12:45pm ET on December 31. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the January 2 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Russian President Vladimir Putin used his annual New Year's address on December 31 to concretize Russian ideological priorities for 2024, notably omitting any mentions of the war in Ukraine and instead focusing on setting ideological conditions for the upcoming year. In stark contrast to last year's New Year's address, wherein Putin addressed the nation at the headquarters of the Southern Military District surrounded by uniformed military personnel and talked explicitly about Russia's goals in Ukraine, Putin's 2023 address shows him standing alone against the backdrop of the Kremlin, without a single mention of the "special military operation."^[1] Putin instead opted to very briefly thank Russian military personnel for fighting for "truth and justice," and otherwise focused on emphasizing Russian national unity.^[2] Putin also stated that 2024 will be the "Year of the Family," emphasizing that the Russian family is the backbone of "the multinational people of Russia," and that Russia is "one big country, one big family."

Putin has in recent weeks frequently discussed Russia's continued maximalist intentions for the war in Ukraine, and Putin likely sought to set more domestically-oriented ideological conditions during his New Year's speech.^[3] Putin's invocation of 2024 as the "Year of the Family," as well as his emphasis on Russian "multinationalism," further serve to clearly delineate the Kremlin's ideological line going into 2024, orienting domestic policy around the preservation of traditional Russian family values and the protection of Russian multinationalism, which both fit into Putin's wider ideology of a Russian

World (*Russkiy Mir*) inclusive of groups within and beyond Russia.[4] ISW has recently assessed that Putin is trying to re-establish the conception of the Russian World as the backbone of Russian domestic and foreign policy, and the 2023 New Year's address identifies Russian families and Russian multinationalism as pillars of this concretized Russian World.[5] The Kremlin's conceptions of the Russian World will undoubtedly impact Russian administrative, bureaucratic, and sociocultural priorities in occupied Ukraine, as well as military goals on the battlefield in the year to come.

Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 29 to 30 and on December 31, underscoring a notable recent increase in the percentage of Russian Shahed-136/131 drones penetrating or avoiding Ukrainian air defenses.

The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Russian forces struck Kharkiv City with six S-300 missiles and launched 49 Shahed drones primarily at Ukrainian frontline positions as well as civilian, military, and infrastructure facilities in Kharkiv, Kherson, Mykolaiv, and Zaporizhia oblasts on the night of December 30 to 31.[6] Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 12 missiles at targets in Ukraine on December 31, an unspecified number of which struck civilian infrastructure in Kharkiv and Donetsk oblasts.[7] The Ukrainian Air Force reported that Ukrainian forces shot down 21 of the Shahed drones, a notably lower rate of interceptions for Ukrainian air defenses than ISW has previously observed.[8] Ukrainian Air Force Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat noted that Russian strikes on Ukrainian frontline positions with Shahed drones are “peculiar,” and it is possible that the lower interception rate is a result of Russian forces targeting frontline areas that have less air defense coverage or coverage less optimized for intercepting drones than population centers in the rear.[9] Ukrainian air defenses similarly had a lower-than-usual interception rate when Ukrainian forces shot down five out of 10 Shahed drones on December 30 and 27 out of 36 Shahed drones on December 29.[10] Russian milbloggers claimed on December 29 that Russian forces launched Shaheds that are harder to detect because they are painted black and partially absorb radio signals.[11] Ihnat previously stated on November 25 that Russian forces are beginning to use black paint and carbon fiber materiel on Shahed drones to complicate the work of Ukrainian air defense systems.[12] It is unclear if adaptations to the Shahed drones are decreasing the Ukrainians’ ability to intercept the drones or if the apparent trend in the decreased Ukrainian interception rate will continue.

Russian forces, particularly Russian airborne (VDV) Forces, are reportedly suffering heavy losses in simultaneous infantry-heavy Russian offensive operations on multiple fronts.

A Russian milblogger claimed on December 31 that units of the Russian VDV forces are suffering heavy losses and are unable to rest and recover.[13] The milblogger claimed that experienced and trained VDV contract servicemen (*kontraktniki*) form a lower proportion of the VDV's personnel, and that the VDV has suffered high losses amongst experienced members of the command cadre that had previously made up the core of the VDV forces. Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets assessed on December 31 that elements of the newly formed 104th VDV Division, particularly its 328th and 337th VDV Regiments, will have to withdraw from the Krynyky area in the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast for rest and replenishment after a month of almost continuous fighting in the area.[14] The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) assessed on December 14 that elements of the 104th VDV Division likely suffered exceptionally heavy losses near Krynyky due to inadequate air and artillery support and the inexperience of many of its personnel.[15] VDV Commander Colonel General Mikhail Teplinsky implied on December 23 that the Russian military command is deploying new VDV officers and troops directly from graduation from initial training to the frontlines without having them complete pre-combat training.[16] Teplinsky stated that some recent graduates of the Ryazan Higher Airborne Command School will join the 104th Division in the Kherson direction.[17]

The high casualty rate, particularly among units such as the VDV that were considered elite before 2022, is largely a reflection of the fact that the Russian military command has chosen to pursue simultaneous offensive operations along the entire frontline, often prioritizing marginal gains at the cost of disproportionate losses. The UK MoD stated on December 30 that “the average daily number of Russian casualties in Ukraine has risen by almost 300 during the course of 2023” and that if the current casualty rate continues Russian forces will have lost over half a million personnel total in Ukraine by the end of 2024.[18] A declassified US intelligence assessment reportedly shared with Congress on December 12 stated that Russian forces have lost 315,000 personnel since the beginning of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.[19] The current tempo and style of Russian offensives in Ukraine are reflective of these estimated casualty rates. Russian forces have conducted multiple waves of mass mechanized assaults and infantry-led assaults to capture Avdiivka, Donetsk Oblast, since October 10 despite heavy personnel losses, for example, and have rushed untrained VDV elements to defend against Ukrainian ground operations in the east bank of Kherson Oblast, where they have also taken heavy losses.[20] The Russian military leadership has undertaken extensive force generation measures as part of efforts to offset manpower losses, however, including partial mobilization since September 2022 and ongoing crypto-mobilization efforts.[21] The current casualty rate should not be taken as permanent—the Russian military command could change the tempo and pace of offensive operations or take time to reconstitute its forces for more effective future offensive operations. Ukraine’s Western partners must guard against complacency when assessing Russian losses and operational failures in Ukraine, as ISW has previously assessed.[22]

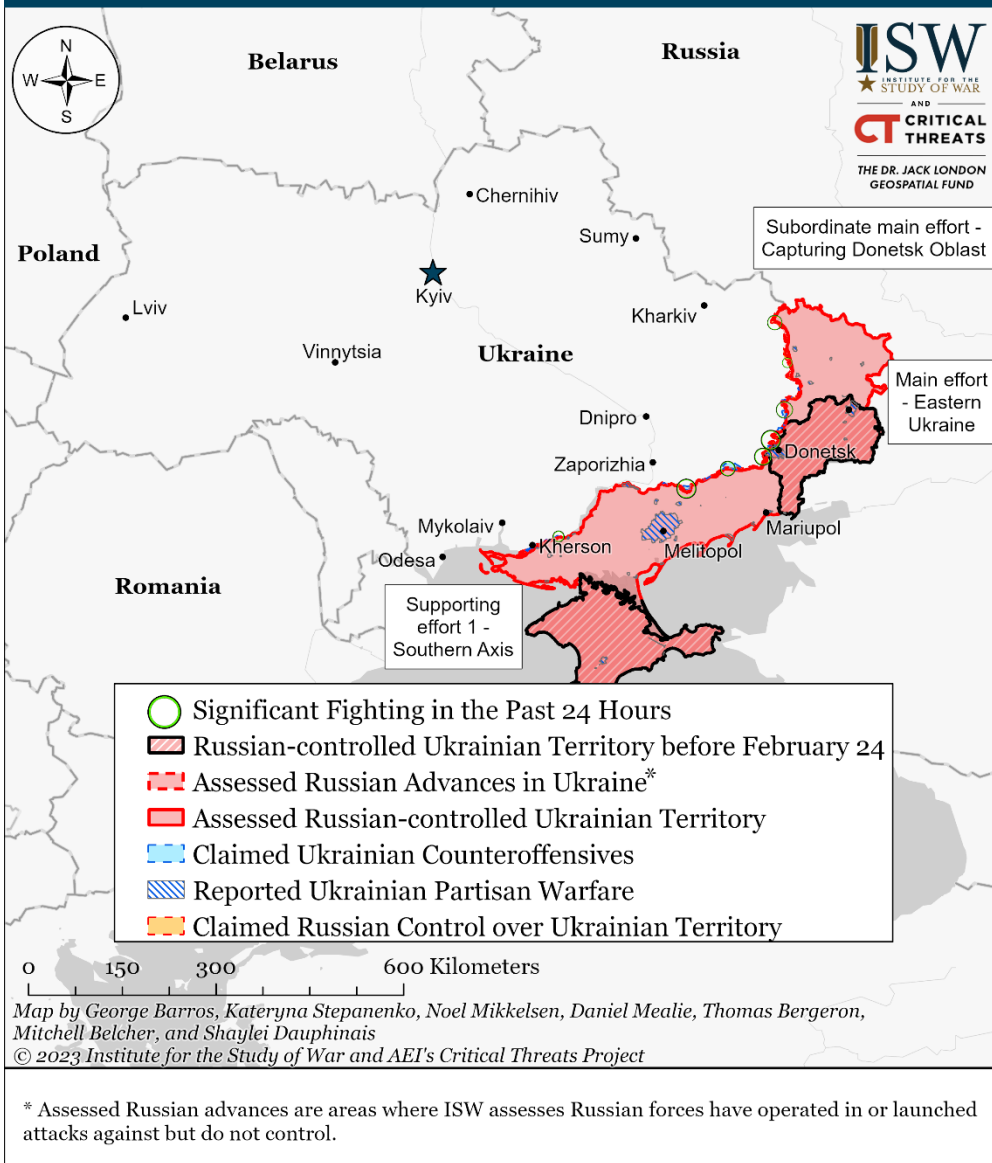
A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger argued that ethnic Russians do not have enough domestic power in Russia while reiterating a common Russian information operation aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity. The milblogger claimed on December 31 that the illegal Russian annexation of occupied Luhansk Oblast as the Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR), occupied Donetsk Oblast as the Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR), and occupied Crimea as the Republic of Crimea created three new republics that are specifically for “ethnic Russians.”[23] The milblogger argued that ethnic Russians do not have enough domestic power because there was not a republic dedicated to ethnic Russians prior to Russia’s illegal annexation of the LNR, DNR and Crimea. The milblogger claimed that Russia has many republics dedicated to providing “statehood” to ethnic minorities such as the republics of Tatarstan, Karelia, and Dagestan.[24] The milblogger claimed that Russians instead have “territories,” likely referring to other designations for Russian federal subjects such as krais and oblasts. Russian republics, generally named after the ethnic minority inhabiting the area, are nominally allowed under Russian law to exercise more administrative autonomy than other Russian federal subjects.[25] The milblogger argued that Russia needs more “ethnic Russian” republics to promote the interests of ethnic Russians, reflecting the Russian pro-war ultranationalist community’s wider objective to eliminate non-Russian culture from Russian society. The milblogger’s argument rests on the long-running Russian information operation denying the existence of Ukrainian identity by falsely claiming that Ukrainians are ethnic Russians.[26] The milblogger’s argument also attributes coherence to DNR and LNR governance where ISW has consistently observed administrative disorganization and ineptitude.[27]

Key Takeaways:

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin used his annual New Year's address on December 31 to concretize Russian ideological priorities for 2024, notably omitting any mentions of the war in Ukraine and instead focusing on setting ideological conditions for the upcoming year.**

- **Russian forces conducted another series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 29 to 30 and on December 31, underscoring a notable recent increase in the percentage of Russian Shahed-136/131 drones penetrating or avoiding Ukrainian air defenses.**
- **Russian forces, particularly Russian airborne (VDV) Forces, are reportedly suffering heavy losses in simultaneous infantry-heavy Russian offensive operations on multiple fronts.**
- **A prominent Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger argued that ethnic Russians do not have enough domestic power in Russia while reiterating a common Russian information operation aimed at erasing Ukrainian identity.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted positional engagements along the entire line of conduct, but there were no confirmed map changes on December 31.**
- **Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko is spearheading efforts to consolidate sociocultural control of occupied areas of Ukraine via the information space.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 31, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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)

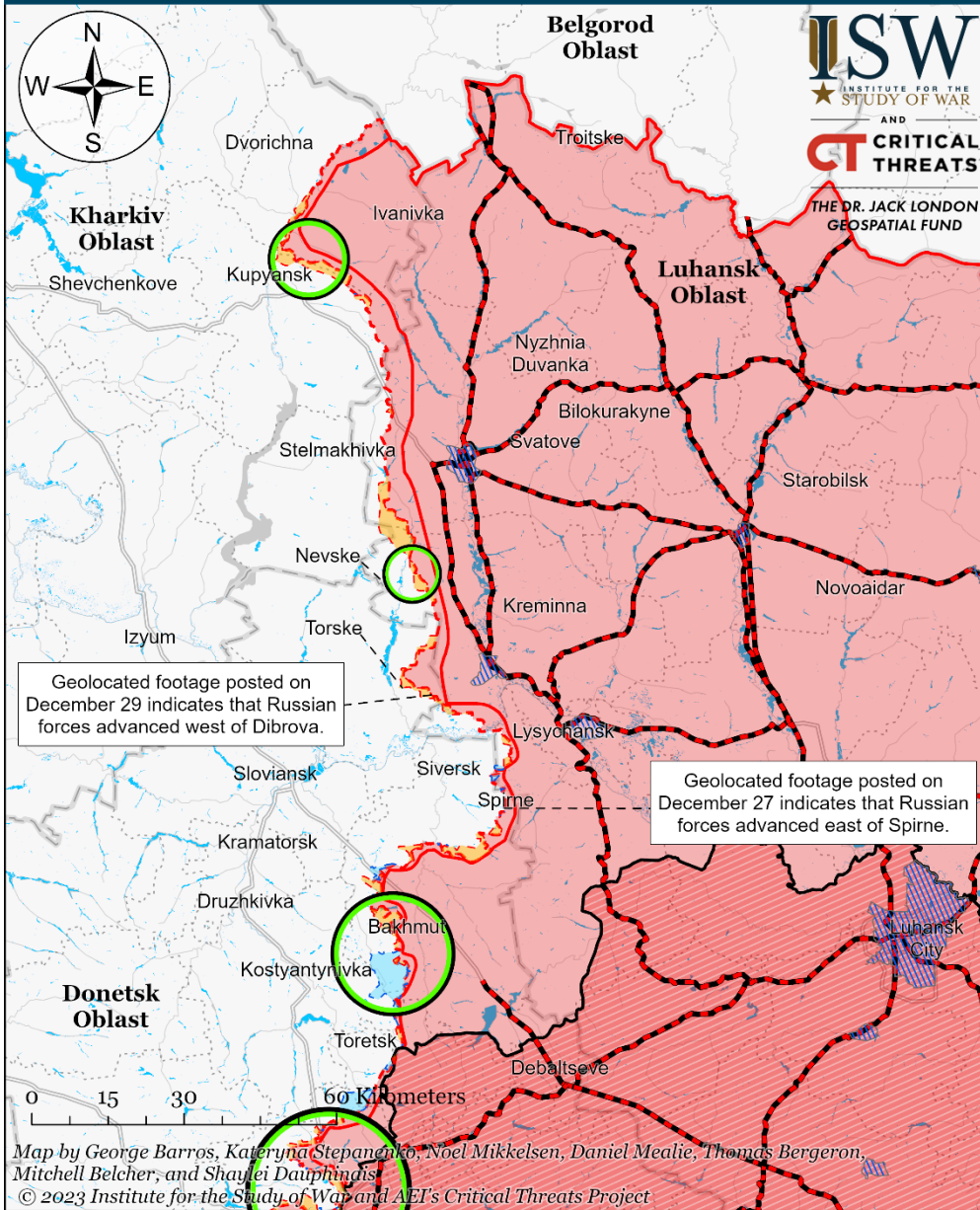
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization 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)

Ukrainian forces reportedly advanced southeast of Kupyansk and continued positional engagements with Russian forces along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on December 31. A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked near Orlyanka (southeast of Kupyansk) and achieved partial success, although ISW has not observed confirmation of this claim.[28] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional fighting continued northeast of Kupyansk near Synkivka, southwest of Svatove near Makiivka, and southwest of Kreminna near Dibrova and the Serebryanske forest area.[29] Ukrainian Ground Forces Command Spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Volodymyr Fityo stated that Ukrainian forces are conducting an active defense in the Kupyansk, Lyman, and Bakhmut directions and are conducting ground attacks when possible.[30]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of December 31, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



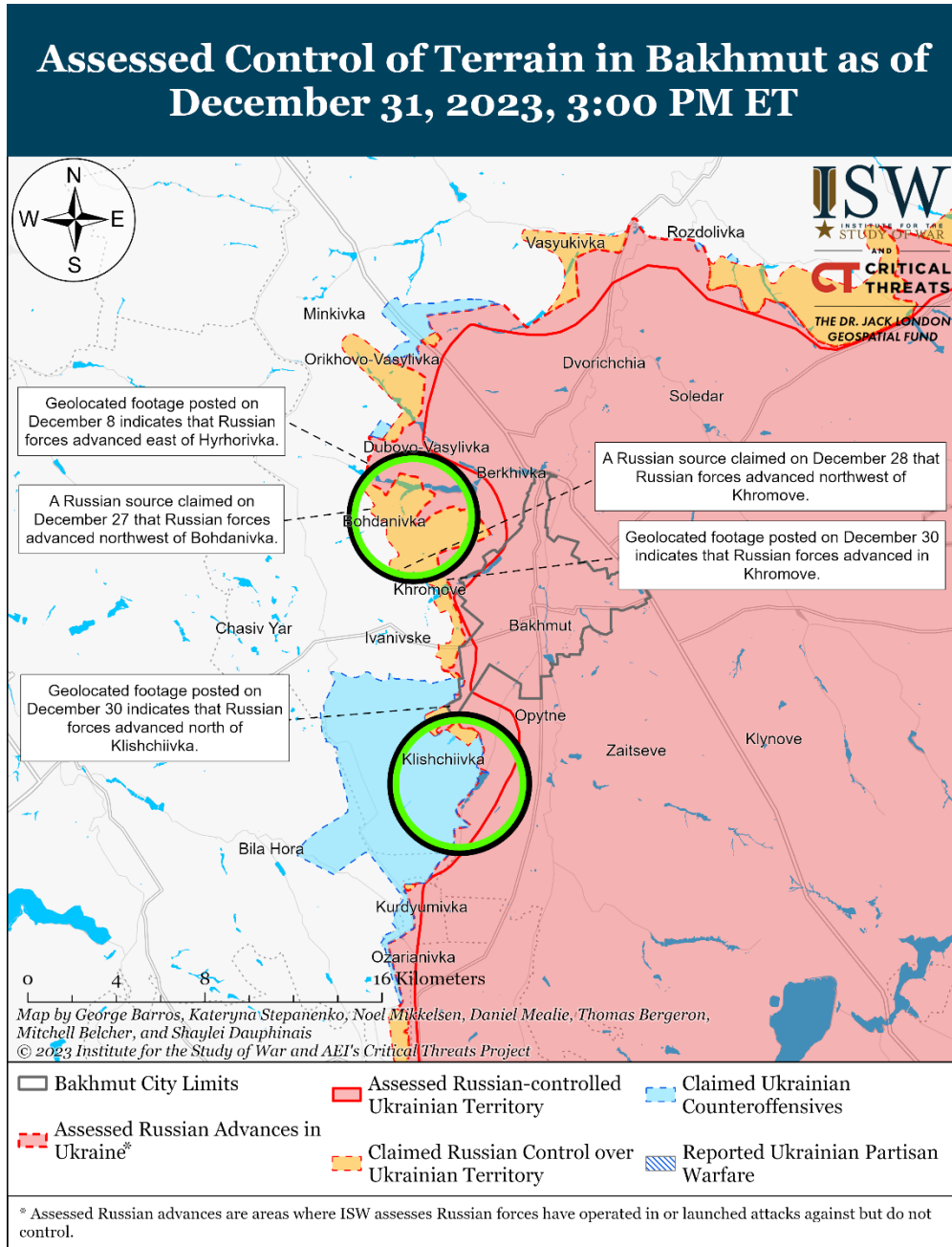
- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- - - Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Russian Ground Lines of Communication
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- ▨ Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory

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

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 27 that Russian forces advanced up to three kilometers in the Serebryanske Forest.

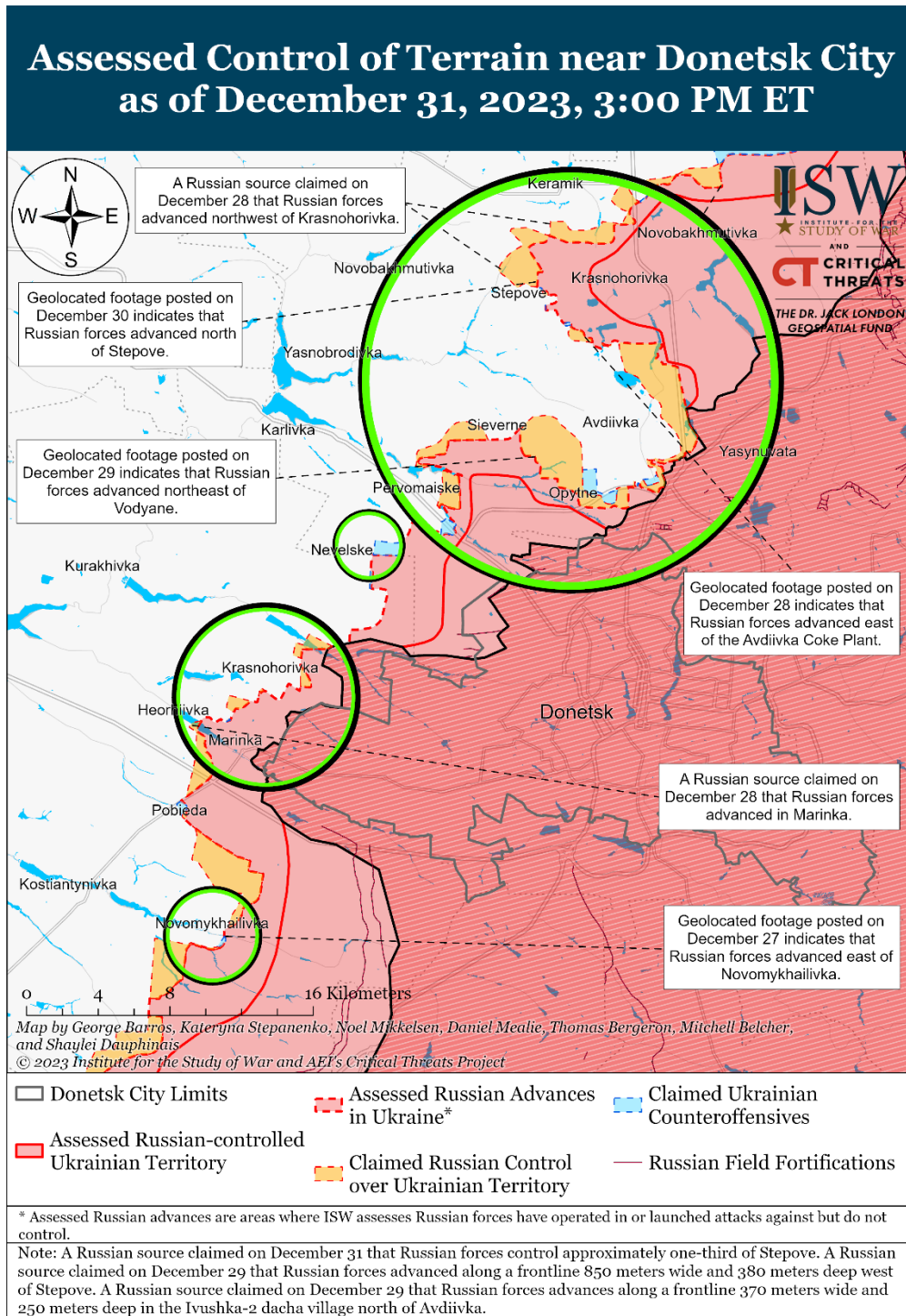
Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia’s proxies in Donbas)

Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements near Bakhmut on December 31, but there were no changes to the frontline in this area. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional fighting continued northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka and southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka.[31] Elements of the Russian 58th Spetsnaz Battalion (1st Donetsk People’s Republic [DNR] Army Corps) reportedly continue to operate in the Bakhmut direction.[32] Elements of the Russian “Sever-V” (Volunteer Assault Corps) reportedly continue operating on the northern flank of Bakhmut.[33]



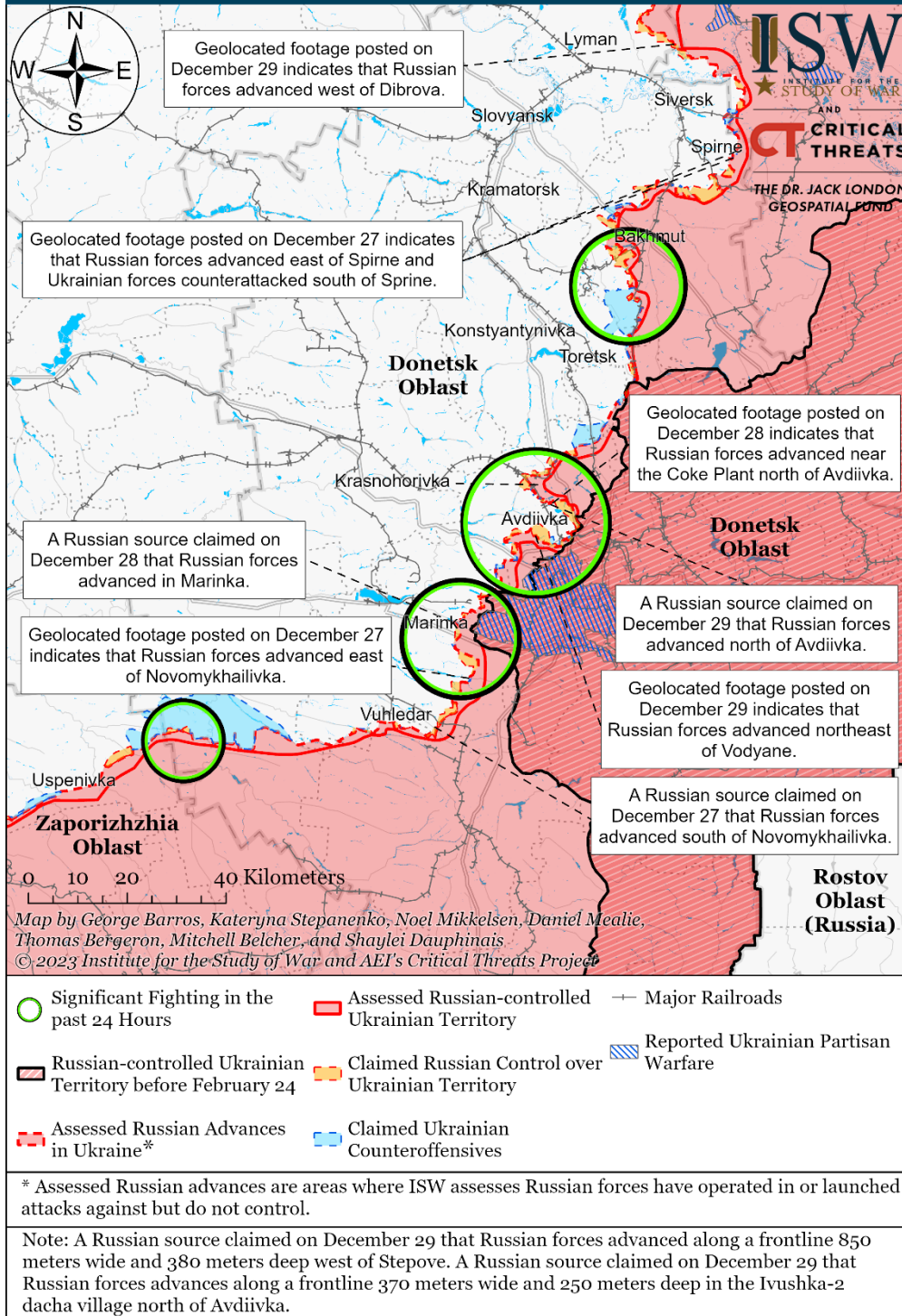
Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements near Avdiivka on December 31, but there were no changes to the frontline in this area. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces northwest of Avdiivka control about one third of Stepove and are advancing toward Novobakhmutivka and Berdychi and making progress towards the 9th Kvartal area on the southwestern outskirts of Avdiivka.[34] Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements northwest of Avdiivka

near Stepove and the Avdiivka Coke Plant and southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske, Nevelske and Sieverne.[35] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun reported that Russian forces are increasing the number of reserves in the Avdiivka and Marinka directions.[36]



Russian forces continued ground attacks west and southwest of Donetsk City on December 31, but there were no changes in the frontline in this area. Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that Russian forces continued positional engagements near Marinka, Krasnohorivka, and Heorhiivka (both west of Donetsk City), and Novomykhailivka (southwest of Donetsk City).[37] Ukrainian Kurakhove City Military Administration Head Roman Padun stated that Russian forces conducted strikes on Kurakhove (west of Donetsk City) with S-300 missiles and Uragan MLRS rockets on December 31.[38]

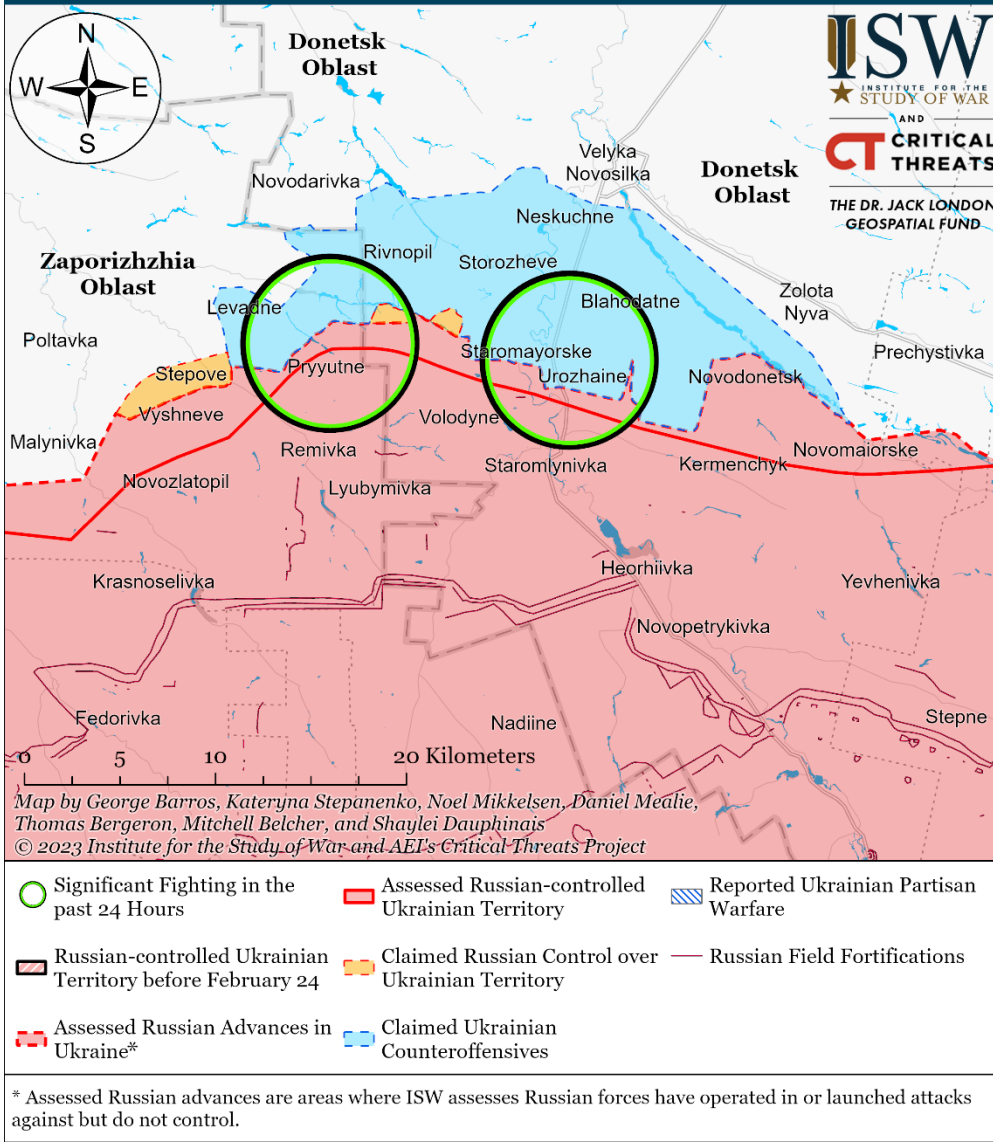
Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of December 31, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

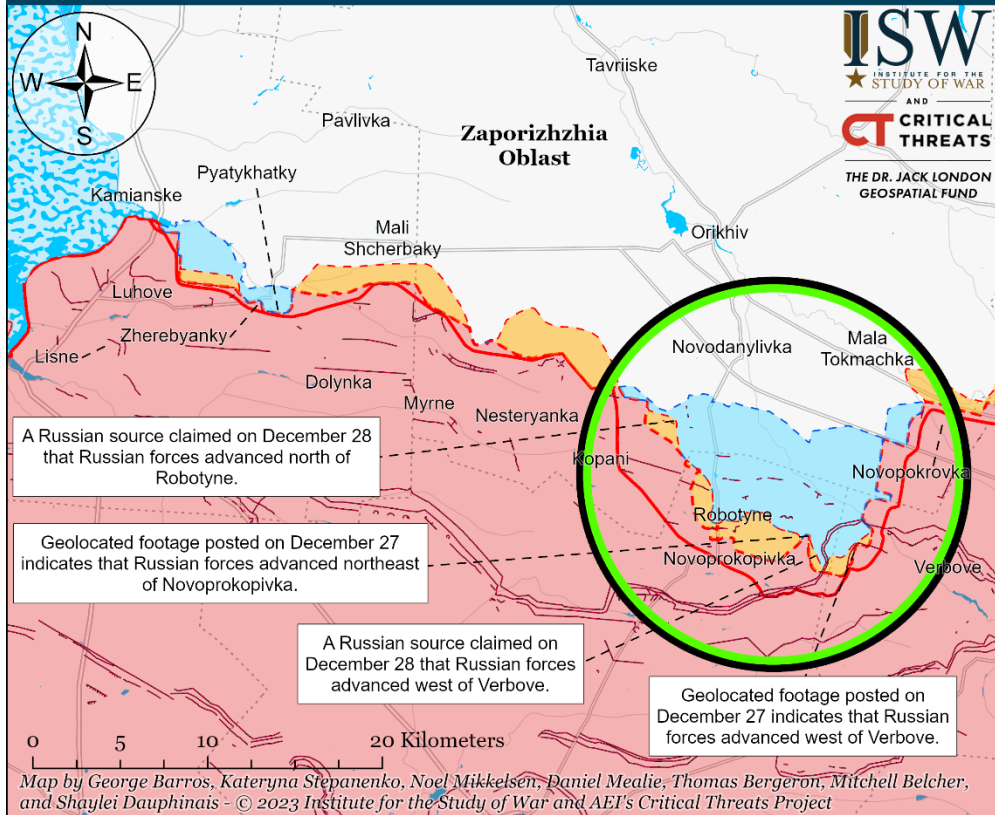
Russian forces conducted relatively more ground attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on December 31 than in previous days, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area. Ukrainian and Russian sources reported positional engagements near Urozhaine (south of Velyka Novosilka) and Pryyutne (southwest of Velyka Novosilka).[39] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are focusing on conducting attacks west of Staromayorske (south of Velyka Novosilka) and along the Rivnopil-Pryyutne line southwest of Velyka Novosilka.[40] The same milblogger previously claimed on December 29 that Russian forces became more active in this area, which generally accords with increased Ukrainian and Russian reports of positional engagements in the area.[41] Russian forces may be re-starting attacks here in order to draw some Ukrainian forces away from defensive operations in Avdiivka, but the current rate of Russian attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area is not at a scale beyond small positional engagements. Elements of the 143rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (5th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Eastern Military District [EMD]) are reportedly operating north of Pryytune.[42]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around the Vremivka Salient as of December 31, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian forces continued efforts to regain previously lost positions in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on December 31, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported positional engagements near Robotyne, west of Verbove (east of Robotyne), and east of Kopani (northwest of Robotyne).[43] Russian sources reported intense artillery fire and counterbattery combat by both Ukrainian and Russian forces in this area.[44] One milblogger claimed that Russian forces have made "serious progress" in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast over the past week, and that the situation for Ukrainian forces is particularly difficult west of Robotyne and near Novofedorivka (northeast of Verbove).[45] Elements of the 42nd Motorized Rifle Division (58th CAA, Southern Military District [SMD]), including the 1st Battalion of the 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment and elements of the 291st Motorized Rifle Regiment, are reportedly operating in the area.[46]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of December 31, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



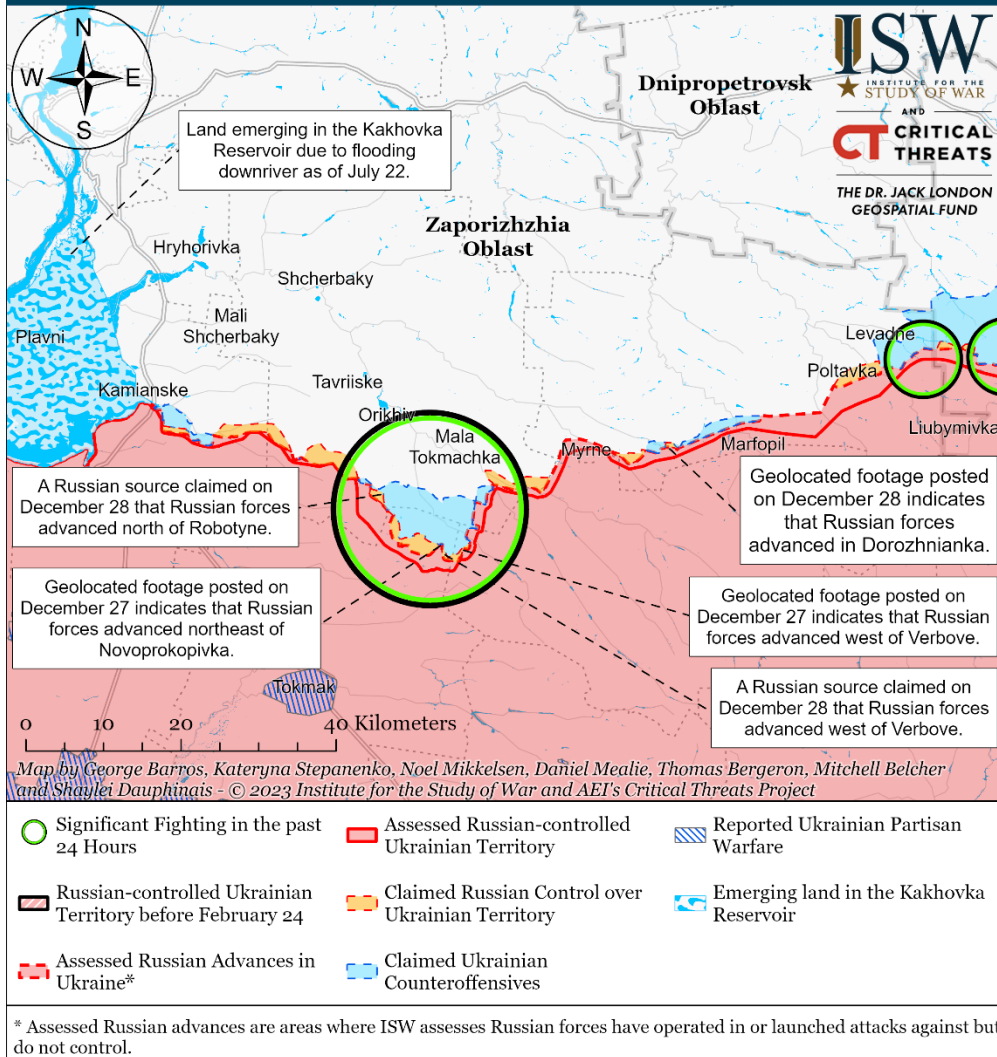
Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Mitchell Belcher, and Shaylei Dauphinais - © 2023 Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project

Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory	Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24	Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory	Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir
Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*	Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives	Russian Field Fortifications

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

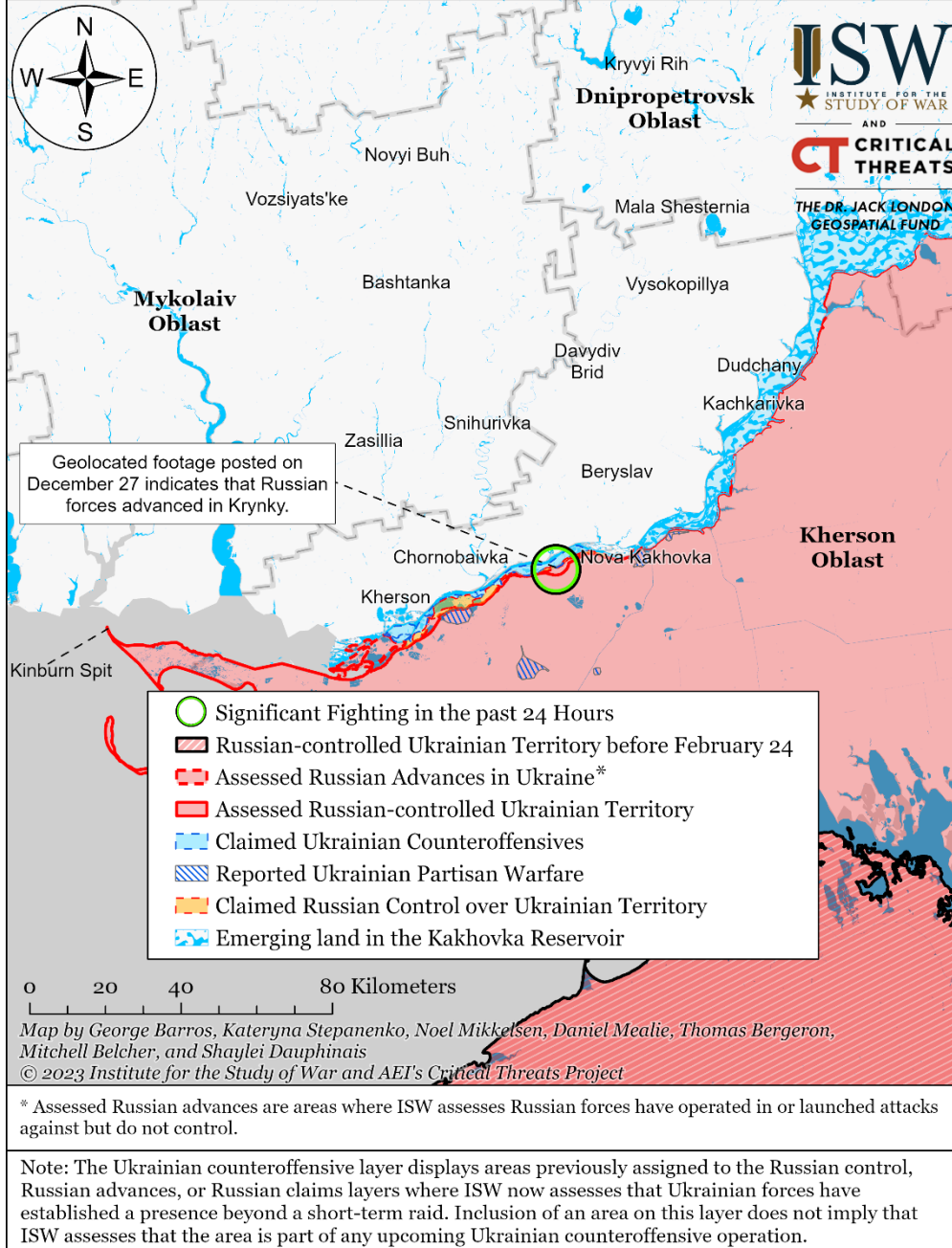
Note: A Russian source claimed on December 29 that Russian forces advanced up to two kilometers east of Novopropkivka. A Russian source claimed on December 29 that Ukrainian forces lost 6.58 square kilometers in the Robotyne area in "recent days".

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of December 31, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Positional engagements continued on the east (left) bank of Kherson Oblast on December 31, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area.[47] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked towards Poyma (northeast of Oleshky) and that Russian forces unsuccessfully counterattacked within Krynky.[48] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that the continued Ukrainian presence on the east bank has forced the command of the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces to redistribute artillery fire missions to provide increased cover for Russian troops fighting on the east bank, as opposed to striking Ukrainian infrastructure on the west (right) bank.[49]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 31, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

See topline text.

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

Russian Deputy Chairperson of the State Duma Committee on Defense and commander of the “Grom Kaskad” unmanned aviation brigade Denis Sablin claimed on December 30 that the range of Russian

first-person view (FPV) drones has increased to 32 kilometers, whereas Sablin claimed Ukrainian FPV drones have a maximum range of 22 kilometers.[50]

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 Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko is spearheading efforts to consolidate sociocultural control of occupied areas of Ukraine via the information space. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation governor Yevgeny Balitsky stated that he met with Kiriyenko on December 31 during a meeting with "cultural workers" in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[51] Kiriyenko and Balitsky reportedly discussed the development of Russian-led cultural programs in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast for 2024, including plans to create a new focus called "Mass Media of New Regions" at the Tavrida Art forum, where young cultural figures can train and interact with Russian federal media platforms. Russian media reported in June that Russian occupation authorities began efforts to reformat the information space using unified and centralized media agencies.[52]

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian state media outlet *RIA Novosti* published an interview with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov on December 31 wherein he promoted a Russian information operation alleging that Western actors are causing instability in Serbia.[53] The Kremlin will likely continue to exploit protests against Serbian President Alexander Vucic in an effort to drive a wedge between Serbia and the West.[54]

Russian sources continue to promote Kremlin narratives that are part of a wider effort to set conditions to justify potential future provocations with Baltic and Scandinavian NATO members. A prominent milblogger, whom the Russian MoD and Kremlin have previously awarded for his service to the Russian Armed Forces, amplified a claim on December 30 in which another Russian milblogger complained that Estonia and Finland are attempting to provoke a crisis in the region and deprive Russia of its navigational rights in the Gulf of Finland.[55] The Kremlin has recently promoted increasingly aggressive rhetorical and military posturing towards Finland which is cause for concern about Russia's long-term aims.[56]

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)

Nothing significant to report.

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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