Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 30, 2023

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Kateryna Stepanenko, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan December 30, 2023, 6:45pm 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: The data cut-off for this product was 1:30pm ET on December 30. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 31 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a large series of strikes against targets in Russia on the night of December 29 to 30 and on December 30. Ukrainian security sources told Western and Ukrainian media that Ukrainian forces launched more than 70 drones on the night of December 29 to 30 at Russian military infrastructure and defense industrial facilities near Moscow, Belgorod, Tula, Tver, and Bryansk cities.[1] The Ukrainian security sources reportedly characterized these strikes as a response to the Russian strikes on December 29, which was the largest series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine since the start of the full-scale invasion.[2] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces intercepted 32 Ukrainian drones in Bryansk, Orel, Kursk, and Moscow oblasts on the night of December 29 to 30.[3] The discrepancy between these Russian and Ukrainian figures may suggest that Ukrainian forces struck many of their intended targets, as Ukrainian security sources suggested to Western and Ukrainian media.[4] Ukrainian forces reportedly struck the Kreminy El Plant in Bryansk City, which is Russia's second largest producer of microelectronics, 90 percent of whose manufactured products are reportedly components of Russian military equipment and systems. [5] Geolocated footage published on December 30 shows explosions over Bryansk City. [6] The Russian MoD stated that Russian air defenses shot down 12 Ukrainian MLRS rockets in Belgorod Oblast on December 29 and several more Ukrainian MLRS rockets near Belgorod City during the day on December 30.[7] Ukrainian security sources reportedly told Western and Ukrainian media that the Ukrainian strikes on December 30 targeted Russian military targets near Belgorod City.[8]

Russian forces conducted a lower number of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on December 30 following the large Russian strike series on December 29. Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces launched 10 Shahed-136/-131 drones at targets in southern Ukraine, an Iskander-M missile at Zaporizhzhia City, an unspecified number of Kh-59 missiles at Dnipro and Odesa cities, and six unspecified missiles at Kharkiv City.[9] Ukrainian officials reported that Ukrainian forces intercepted five of the drones, the Iskander-M missile, and one of the Kh-59 missiles.[10] Russian forces reportedly struck civilian infrastructure in Kharkiv City, an enterprise in Odesa City, and the office of the Ukrainian Human Rights Commissioner in Kherson City.[11] Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky stated on December 30 that the December 29 Russian strike series killed 39 people and wounded 159 and impacted hundreds of civilian objects.[12] The *Economist* reported on December 29 that a source in Ukraine's defense industry stated that Russian strikes on December 29 predominately targeted defense industrial facilities in Ukraine, including those connected to Ukrainian missile and drone production.[13] Russian strikes against Ukrainian defense industrial facilities likely mean to prevent Ukraine from developing key capacities to sustain operations for a longer war effort and disrupt Ukrainian efforts to seek Western partnerships for joint production in Ukraine.[14]

Russian officials continued to clearly state that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine or the West in good faith and intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine. Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mikhail Galuzin stated in an interview with Russian state outlet *RIA Novosti* on December 30 that Russia will agree to a settlement when Ukraine is "neutral, non-aligned, and nuclear-free," "demilitariz[ed]," and "denazi[fied]" — long-standing Russian demands for Ukraine's exclusion from NATO and EU membership, the removal of Ukraine's ability to defend its land and its people, and the replacement of the current elected Ukrainian government with a Kremlin-accepted government.[15] Galuzin also reiterated the Kremlin narrative that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky — and not Russian President Vladimir Putin — is to blame for the absence of negotiations and claimed that Zelensky's proposed peace plan "has nothing to do with peace" but "justif[ies] the continuation of hostilities." Galuzin claimed that Russia has never refused to engage in dialogue with Ukraine, but that Russia has "no choice" but to complete all its "assigned tasks" — Russia's maximalist objectives — in Ukraine.

The Kremlin's recent public rhetoric about its maximalist objectives and imperial designs in Ukraine are permeating the Russian information space. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed on December 30 that Western media is disseminating "rumors" about negotiations that would end the war in Ukraine by giving Russia unspecified parts of Ukrainian territory.[16] The milblogger stated that Russia is not interested in such "limited proposals," suggesting that the milblogger believes that Russia's war objectives extend beyond its currently occupied territory. The milblogger also claimed that Ukraine is not yet sufficiently demoralized and "exhausted" to accept a "catastrophic capitulation," suggesting that the milblogger believes that Russia should only accept such a "catastrophic [Ukrainian] capitulation" and is calling on Russia to achieve these maximalist objectives in part through psychological means. Russian sources specifically amplified Deputy Chairperson of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev's labelling of Odesa, Dnipro, Kharkiv, Mykolaiv, and Kyiv as "Russian cities" on December 28. The prominent milblogger claimed on December 30 that the war will end when Ukraine allows Russia to take Kharkiy, Mykolaiy, Odesa, and other Ukrainian oblasts.[17] Former Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) People's Militia Spokesperson Eduard Basurin claimed on December 30 that Russia's task for the war in Ukraine was previously "blurry" and "there was no understanding of where [Russian] borders should stop" but Medvedev's statement makes it clear that Russia has determined that its borders should allow for "complete [Russian] control" of the Black Sea and should include Kyiv. [18] Basurin called Kyiv "the capital of [Russia's] large empire" and the birthplace of Russian Orthodoxy and the word "Rus" (in reference to Kyivan Rus). Basurin's statements echo those of Putin, who featured similar claims in his July 2021 "Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians" essay and who has recently reverted to narratives about Kvivan Rus as part of the "Russian World" (Russkiy Mir) to frame Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a historically justified imperial reconquest.[19]

Russia continues to set information conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova. Russian state news wire TASS reported on December 27 that 19.1 percent of school children in Moldova choose to receive educational instruction in the Russian language. [20] TASS claimed that the Moldovan government's refusal to recognize Russian as a state language in 1989 led to the war in Transnistria and the conflict with Gagauzia.[21] TASS further claimed that the ruling pro-European Moldovan Party of Action and Solidarity is exacerbating these alleged long-standing language divides by failing to grant Russian language the status of "a language of interethnic communication."[22] Russian forces have occupied Transnistria since 1992, and Russia has continually supported pro-Russian actors in Moldova to promote political instability and division.[23] Claims that the Party of Action and Solidarity is threating Russian speakers in Moldova allow Russia to frame any potential Russian support for pro-Kremlin actors in Moldova as a humanitarian attempt to protect Russian speakers instead of an attempt to politically destabilize Moldova itself. The Kremlin used exactly this line of argument as one of the bases for its 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. [24] Russia is likely attempting to justify any future actions in Moldova as an attempt to protect its "compatriots abroad," a term that Russia has broadly defined to mean ethnic Russians and Russian speakers outside of Russia regardless of their citizenship. Russia continues to justify its invasion of Ukraine, in part, by claiming Russia is protecting its "compatriots" in Ukraine and their right to use Russian language and will likely continue to use this narrative when discussing any future Russian attempts at imperial reconquests.[25]

Russia continues attempts to actively shape the Western information space to support Russian positions and undermine support for Ukraine while portraying these efforts as endogenous to the

West. The *Washington Post* reported on December 30 that it obtained Kremlin documents from an unspecified European security service that show that Russian Presidential Administration First Deputy Head Sergei Kiriyenko oversees Kremlin operations to undermine support for Ukraine and NATO in the French information space and through French politicians and activists.[26] The Kremlin documents reportedly listed specific narratives that the Kremlin sought to promote in France including arguments that Western sanctions against Russia have harmed the French economy, that the provision of French weapons supplies to Ukraine has degraded France's ability to defend itself, that continuous support for Ukraine would lead to World War III, and that France should not fund a foreign war.[27] The Kremlin documents also reportedly show that Kremlin political strategists instructed a Russian troll farm employee to write a "200-character comment by a middle-aged French person" arguing that European support for Ukraine is a "stupid adventure" and that continued support for Ukraine is increasing inflation and lowering living standards.[28]

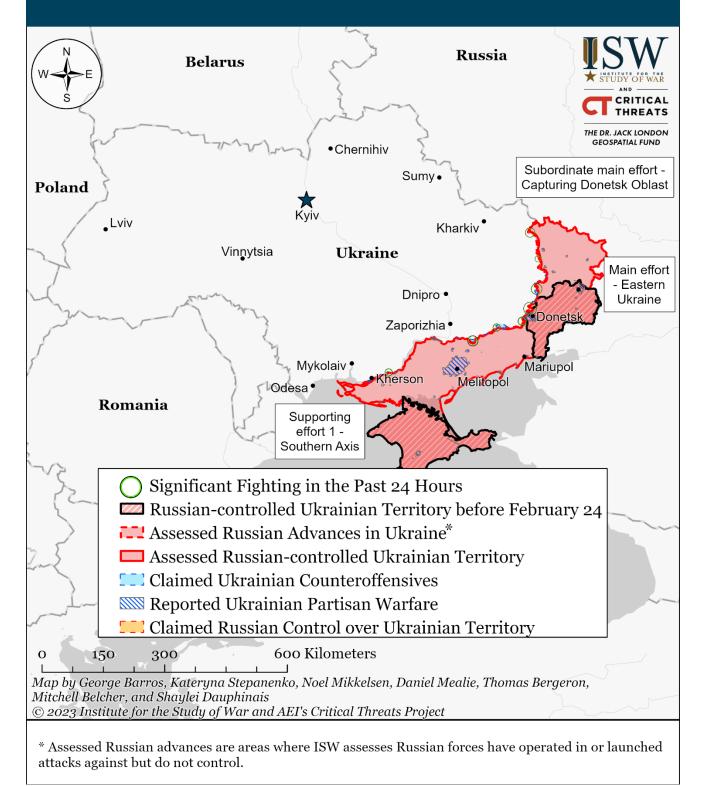
The *Washington Post* also reported that a six-month French government inquiry found that "Russia is conducting a longterm disinformation campaign in [France] to defend and promote Russian interests and to polarize [French] democratic society."[29] The inquiry highlighted French far-right party National Rally's links to the Kremlin and National Rally Party member and French politician Thierry Mariani's continued pro-Russian positions.[30] Mariani, previously under investigation for Russia-related corruption, is the Co-Chair of the Russian government-founded French think tank, the Franco-Russian Dialogue Association.[31] Russia reportedly employs similar information tactics in Ukraine, the West, and worldwide. The Atlantic Council's *Digital Forensic Research Laboratory (DFRLab*) and the *BBC's Verify* project recently found that Russian actors created thousands of fake accounts aimed at defaming former Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov and connected the effort to a previous Russian information campaign to discredit Commander-in-Chief General Valerii Zaluzhnyi in early 2023.[32] Independent social media monitor *Graphika* also found that Russian actors Institute for the Study of War and AEI's Critical Threats Project 2023 generated online content designed to appear as domestically generated to reduce Western support for NATO ahead of the July 2023 NATO summit.[33]

The Russian Ministry Foreign Affairs (MFA) emphasized Russia's improving diplomatic relations with non-Western countries in way that suggests that the Kremlin is insecure about the possibility of diplomatic isolation against the backdrop of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Russian MFA published a list on December 30 outlining its accomplishments in gaining political and diplomatic support for Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and expanding cooperation with countries and associations of the "world majority." [34] Russia has previously defined the "world majority" as "a civilizational and cultural community that objectively opposes" the West and alleged that the world is divided into two camps: countries that support the United States and Ukraine and countries that are neutral or support Russia.[35] The MFA cited several accomplishments, such as improving relations with countries in the Asia-Pacific, Middle East, Africa, and Latin America: having Sino-Russian relations reach an "unprecedented level": bringing the Russian–North Korean relations to a new level; and developing Russian–Iranian relations. The MFA also claimed that Russia thwarted Western attempts to isolate Russia, responded to NATO's and the European Union's expansion, and withdrew from a series of treaties. It notably did not identify the expansion of NATO and the EU as the defeats for Russian diplomacy that they were. The Russian MFA has been trying recently to establish new diplomatic relations with African countries and even reopened its embassy in Burkina Faso for the first time since 1992 on December 28.[36] Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin signed a bill in August committing Russia to reopen its embassy in Equatorial Guinea.[37] MFA Deputy Minister Yevgeny Ivanov announced on December 25 that Russia is planning to open additional embassies and diplomatic missions and claimed that while Western countries sent hundreds of Russian diplomats home, these diplomats were able to find other jobs within the MFA network.[38]

Key Takeaways:

- Ukrainian forces reportedly conducted a large series of strikes against targets in Russia on the night of December 29 to 30 and on December 30.
- Russian forces conducted a lower number of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on December 30 following the large Russian strike series on December 29.
- Russian officials continued to clearly state that Russia is not interested in negotiating with Ukraine or the West in good faith and intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine.
- The Kremlin's recent public rhetoric about its maximalist objectives and imperial designs in Ukraine are permeating the Russian information space.
- Russia continues to set information conditions aimed at destabilizing Moldova by framing Russia as a protector of allegedly threatened Russian-language speakers in Moldova.
- Russia continues attempts to actively shape the Western information space to support Russian positions and undermine support for Ukraine while portraying these efforts as endogenous to the West.
- The Russian Ministry Foreign Affairs (MFA) emphasized Russia's improving diplomatic relations with non-Western countries in way that suggests that the Kremlin is insecure about the possibility of diplomatic isolation against the backdrop of its full-scale invasion of Ukraine.
- Russian forces made confirmed gains near Kreminna, Bakhmut and Avdiivka as positional engagements continued along the entire line of contact.
- The Russian military command reportedly continued the dissolution of the "Kaskad" operational combat tactical formation of the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) to support its efforts to formalize control over Russian irregular forces.
- Russia continues efforts to integrate education systems in occupied Ukraine and expand education programs aimed at eliminating Ukrainian identity in occupied territories.

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 30, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



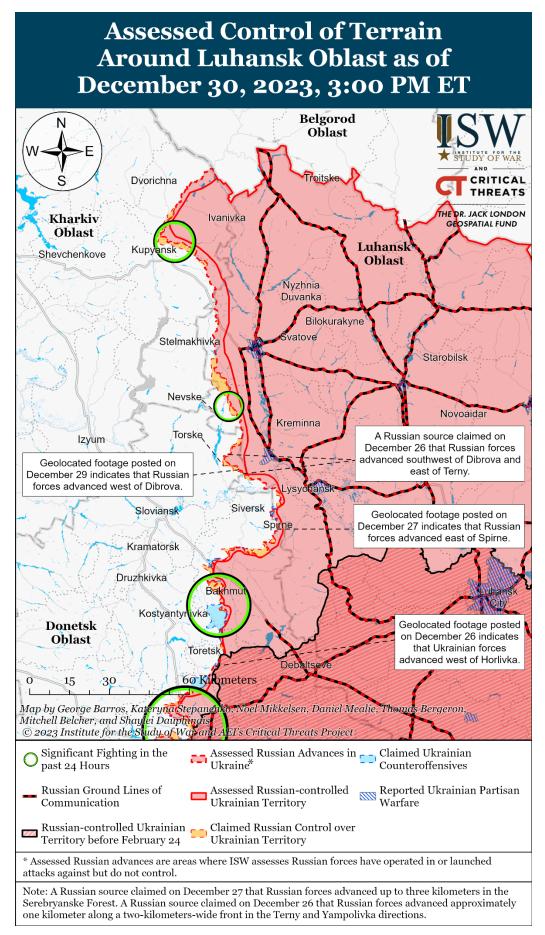
We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military 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

<u> Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine</u>

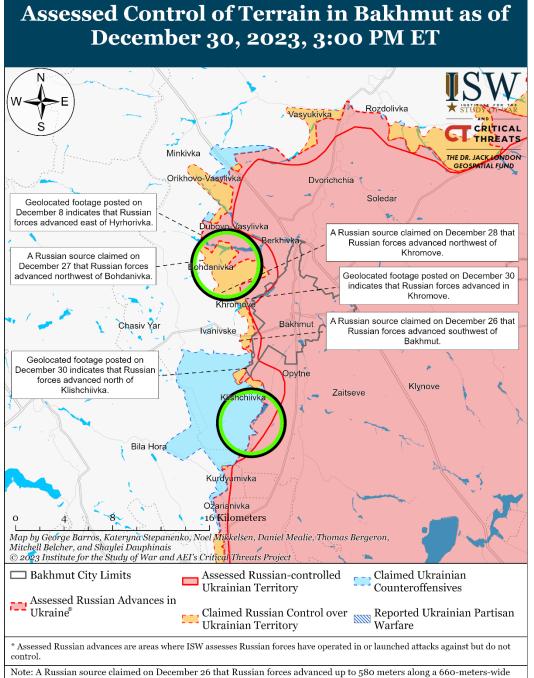
<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Luhansk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and northern Donetsk Oblast)

Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance near Kreminna and continued positional engagements with Ukrainian forces along the Kupyansk-Svatove-Kreminna line on December 30. Geolocated footage published on December 29 indicates that Russian forces marginally advanced west of Dibrova (southwest of Kreminna).[39] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated that positional engagements continued in the Kupyansk direction near Synkivka (northeast of Kupyansk) and Novoselivske (northwest of Svatove) and in the Lyman direction north of Hryhorivka (south of Kreminna), and near Makiivka (northwest of Kreminna), Torske (west of Kreminna), and the Serebryanske forest area (southwest of Kreminna).[40]



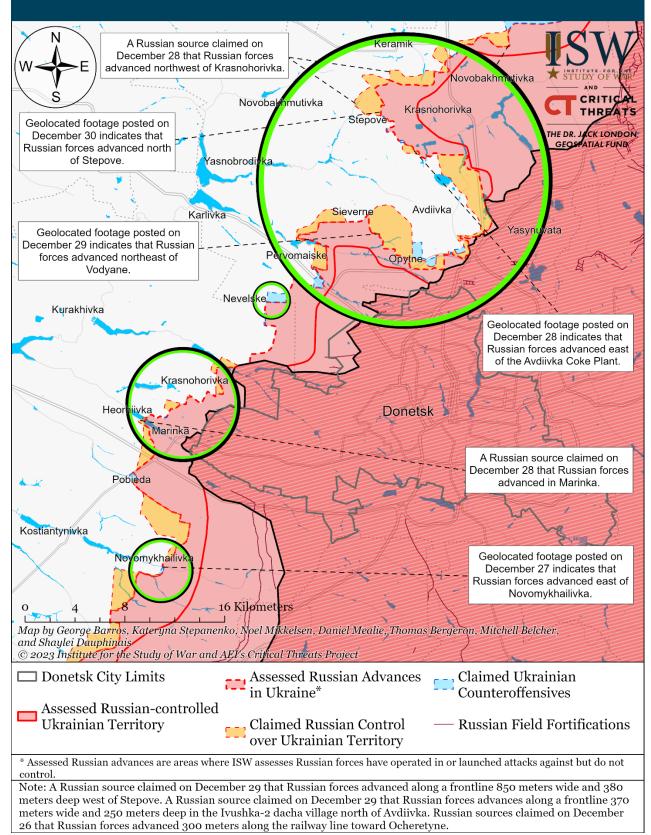
<u>Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Donetsk Oblast</u> (Russian objective: Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast, the claimed territory of Russia's proxies in Donbas)

Russian forces recently made confirmed advances northwest and southwest of Bakhmut. Geolocated footage published on December 30 indicates that Russian forces advanced on the northern and northeastern outskirts of Bohdanivka and northwest of Khromove (both northwest of Bakhmut).[41] Additional geolocated footage published on December 30 indicates that Russian forces advanced north of Klishchiivka (southwest of Bakhmut).[42] Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that positional engagements continued northwest of Bakhmut near Hryhorivka, Khromove, and Bohdanivka; southwest of Bakhmut near Andriivka and Klishchiivka; and northwest of Horlivka near Shumy.[43] Elements of the Russian 98th Airborne (VDV) Division are reportedly still operating northwest of Bakhmut.[44] Elements of the Russian 58th Separate Spetsnaz Battalion (1st Donetsk People's Republic Army Corps [DNR AC]) are reportedly operating near Bakhmut.[45]

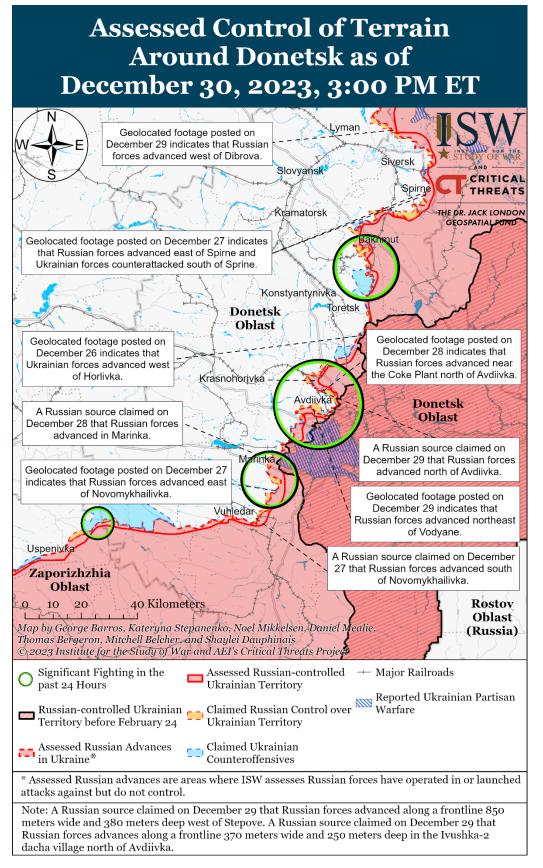


front near the cemetery northwest of Khromove. A Russian source claimed on December 26 that Russian forces advanced up to 200 meters along a 290-meters-wide front in the Bakhmut direction, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources. Russian forces recently made a confirmed advance on Avdiivka's northern flank as positional engagements continued near Avdiivka on December 30. Geolocated footage published on December 30 indicates that Russian forces advanced north of Stepove (north of Avdiivka).[46] A Russian milblogger, citing alleged unspecified Ukrainian analysts, claimed that Russian forces advanced up to 370 meters in width and 250 meters in depth north of Avdiivka itself and marginally advanced towards the Novobakhmutivka-Ochertyne line northwest of Avdiivka.[47] ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these various claims, however. Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that positional engagements continued northwest of Avdiivka near the Avdiivka Coke Plant and Novobakhmutivka; north of Avdiivka near Stepove and west of Kamianka; southeast of Avdiivka near the industrial zone; and southwest of Avdiivka near Optyne, Sieverne, Pervomaiske, and Nevelske.[48] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated that Russian forces have been actively using about 100 drones a day for the past three days near Avdiivka but have reduced their use of artillery in the past day.[49] A spokesperson for a Ukrainian brigade operating near Avdiivka stated that elements of the Russian 114th Motorized Rifle Brigade (1st Donetsk People's Republic [DNR] Army Corps) and the 21st Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Combined Arms Army, Central Military District) are attempting to advance into Stepove.[50]

Assessed Control of Terrain near Donetsk City as of December 30, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional engagements west and southwest of Donetsk City, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline on December 30. Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that positional engagements continued near Krasnohorivka (west of Donetsk City), Marinka, and Novomykhailivka (southwest of Donetsk City).[51]



<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 fighting occurred near Pryyutne (southwest of Velyka Novosilka) and Staromayorske (south of Velyka Novosilka) in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on December 30.[52]

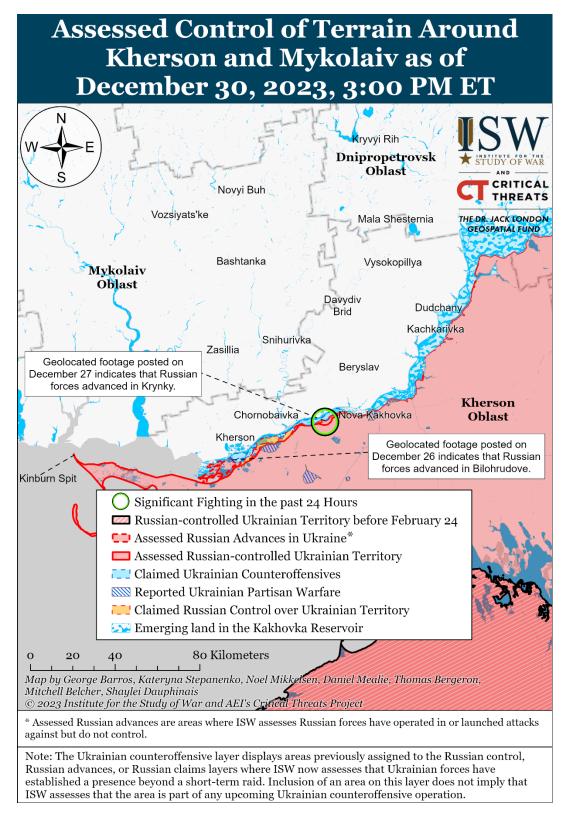


Russian forces continue efforts to regain previously lost positions near Robotyne in western Zaporizhia Oblast on December 30, but there were no changes to the frontline in the area. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced a kilometer in depth east of Robotyne on December 29, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of this claim.[53] Russian and Ukrainian sources stated on December 30 that positional engagements continued west and north of Verbove (east of Robotyne), near Novofedorivka (northeast of Robotyne) and Novoprokopivka (south of Robotyne), west of Robotyne, and east of Kopani (northwest of Robotyne).[54] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets reported on December 30 that in the past two to three days Russian forces have advanced near Verbove, Robotyne, and Kopani and have managed to almost eliminate the Ukrainian penetration of the current Russian main line of defense, which Ukrainian forces made in September 2023.[55] ISW recently observed a likely Ukrainian withdrawal in the area to more defensible positions closer to Robotyne, and Mashovets' reporting is consistent with this observation.[56] Elements of the Russian 7th and 76th Airborne (VDV) Divisions, the 136th Motorized Rifle Brigade (58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District), and the 71st Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) are reportedly operating in the Robotyne area.[57]



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

Ukrainian forces maintain positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast as of December 30, but there were no changes to the frontline in the area. Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that positional engagements continued on the east bank, including near Krynky.[58] Elements of the Russian 810th Naval Infantry Brigade (Black Sea Fleet) are reportedly operating on the east bank.[59] Mashovets stated that the Russian "Dnepr" Grouping of Forces recently withdrew elements of the 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade (49th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) from the frontline for restoration.[60] ISW previously observed elements of the 205th Motorized Rifle Brigade operating on the east bank in August.[61]



Russian sources claimed that Russian forces destroyed a Ukrainian naval drone three kilometers from Sevastopol Bay on December 30.[62]

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

The Russian military command reportedly continued the dissolution of the "Kaskad" operational combat tactical formation of the Donetsk People's Republic's (DNR) Internal Affairs Ministry (MVD) to support its efforts to formalize control over Russian irregular forces. A Russian milblogger claimed on December 29 that Kaskad fighters would be leaving their frontline positions over the following 24 hours after the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) disbanded and dissolved the formation.[63] The milblogger claimed that Chief of the Russian General Staff Army General Valery Gerasimov visited occupied Donetsk Oblast on December 29 to check on Kaskad's disbandment and on issues facing current Russian offensive operations in the area. The milblogger then added on December 30 that the Russian MoD has been disbanding Kaskad over the past four weeks in an effort to absorb its forces into BARS (Russian Combat Army Reserve) by removing Kaskad's command and seizing all of its military equipment.[64] The milblogger claimed that Kaskad's "Vostok" Battalion Commander Alexander Khodakovsky hijacked Kaskad's entire 5th Battalion and subordinated it to an unspecified Rosgvardia formation that does not participate in active combat.[65] Khodakovsky was appointed the deputy head of the Main Directorate of Rosgvardia in occupied Donetsk Oblast in February 2023 and commands Rosgvardia's special rapid response and riot police (OMON and SOBR) in occupied Donetsk Oblast.[66] The milblogger added that the Russian military command tasked Russian military police with disarming Kaskad fighters and using force if they faced resistance. The milblogger quoted Kaskad servicemen as saying, "on the New Year's holiday and ahead of presidential elections, those who defended Donbas from the first day received a gift – a shot in the back."

Another Russian milblogger claimed that some Kaskad fighters attempted to deny these dissolution reports but are now framing them as a transfer to other units in BARS or Rosgvardia.[67] Another milblogger claimed that the Russian military command is keeping Kaskad fighters in the dark about their futures and claimed that it is unclear what will happen to the large sector of the frontline that Kaskad elements were previously responsible for — likely referring to the area near the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast frontline.[68] The Vostok Battalion has not commented on reports of Kaskad's dissolution since December 28, and Khodakovsky and Kaskad's official Telegram channel have not announced or discussed these reports since they appeared in the Russian information space.[69] ISW assessed on December 28 that the dissolution of Kaskad is likely part of the Russian effort to formalize control over some irregular forces and that the dissolution or transfer of Kaskad forces will likely have implications for Kaskad's ability to maintain its pre-formalization structure and may degrade its combat effectiveness.[70]

Russia continues to recruit and prepare additional irregular forces to support the Russian war effort in Ukraine. Russian state news wire *TASS* reported on December 29 that the "Hispaniola" Soccer Fan Volunteer Reconnaissance and Assault Brigade (part of the Redut private military company) established a new detachment specializing in the use of reconnaissance and kamikaze drones.[71] Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov claimed on December 30 that the second group of servicemen of the "Baysangur Benoyevsky" and "Sheikh Mansur" volunteer battalions completed combat training at the Russian Spetsnaz University in Gudermes, Chechnya, and noted that the third group of forces is currently undergoing training.[72] Kadyrov added that Chechen Republic is planning to have 600 personnel from these battalions complete training by the end of January 2024.

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

Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces used an L-504 decoy air defense complex for the first time when launching a Kh-101 missile over Ukraine on December 29.[73] The Russian 2001 patent for L-504 complexes claimed that the decoy reduces the likelihood of a missile being struck by air defenses by three times and can imitate a missile.[74]

Satellite imagery obtained on December 29 showed that Russian forces painted aircraft decoys at the Primorsko-Akhtarsk air base likely in an effort to defend Russian MiG-29 and Su-34 aircraft from drone strikes.[75]

The Central Territorial Directorate of Rosaviatsiya (Russian Federal Air Transport Agency) reportedly visited Kalashnikov concern subsidiary Zala Aero to inspect the development of a new Z-16 drone that can conduct surveillance at any time of the day and can reach speeds of 110 kilometers per hour.[76]

<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)

Russia continues efforts to integrate education systems in occupied Ukraine and expand education programs aimed at eliminating Ukrainian identity in occupied territories. The Russian Ministry of Science and Higher Education reported on December 29 that universities in occupied Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts will receive 28,500 scholarship positions out of a total 620,500 scholarship positions in Russia for the 2024 to 2025 academic school year.[77] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 30 that Russian occupation officials in occupied Melitopol, Zaporizhia Oblast, are creating mandatory lessons stressing Russian cultural identity for Ukrainian children.[78]

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian UN Ambassador Vasily Nebenzya repeated boilerplate Russian rhetoric promoting doubt in continued Western support for Ukraine at an UN Security Council meeting on December 29. Nebenzya claimed that Ukraine should expect "the worst news" in the near future regardless of whether or not the US and European Union (EU) approve new military and financial assistance packages to Ukraine.[79] Nebenzya claims aim to question continued Western support for Ukraine while also framing Western support as futile.

<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 approved the 2024 budget for the Union State on December 29. Union State Secretary of State Dmitri Mezentsev reported that Belarus and Russia agreed to increase their contributions to the Union State budget by 38 percent.[80] Mezentsev also stated that the Union State will expand technology, defense, and security programs and will increase cultural, humanitarian, educational, and patriotic events in 2024.[81]

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

[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67847463 ; https://suspilne dot media/650834-ukrainski-zahisniki-atakuvali-dronami-vijskovi-obekti-u-rosii-dzerela/ ;

[2] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67847463 ; https://suspilne dot media/650834-ukrainski-zahisniki-atakuvali-dronami-vijskovi-obekti-u-rosii-dzerela/ ;

[3] https://t.me/mod_russia/34134

[4] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67847463; https://suspilne dot media/650834-ukrainski-zahisniki-atakuvali-dronami-vijskovi-obekti-u-rosii-dzerela/;

[5] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-67847463 ; https://suspilne dot media/650834-ukrainski-zahisnikiatakuvali-dronami-vijskovi-obekti-u-rosii-dzerela/ ; https://en.defenceua.com/industries/how_important_for_the_russian_defense_industry_is_the_kremniy_el_plant_locating_just_in_110 _km_to_ukraines_border-7791.html ; https://www.kyivpost.com/post/26146

[6] https://t.me/barakholka32/4524; https://x.com/neonhandrail/status/1740988244966490244?s=20

[7] https://t.me/mod_russia/34179 ; https://t.me/mod_russia/34180 ; https://t.me/mod_russia/34128 ; https://t.me/DnevnikDesantnika/5909 ; https://t.me/tass_agency/224692

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