

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 26

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin did not offer to negotiate with Ukraine on December 25 contrary to some reporting. Putin, in a TV interview, stated that he does not think that the war is approaching a “dangerous line” and noted that Russia has no choice but to continue to defend its citizens, before stating that Russia “is ready to negotiate with all parties” involved in the conflict.¹ Putin did not explicitly state that Russia was ready to negotiate directly with Ukraine, instead maintaining his false narrative that Ukraine – which he simply called the “the other side” - had violated Russia’s pre-invasion diplomatic efforts. Putin’s discussions of negotiations have focused on putative discussions with the West rather than with Ukraine, and reflect his continual accusations that Ukraine is merely a Western pawn with no real agency.² This statement was not a departure from that rhetorical line. Putin also stated that he thinks that Russia is “operating in a correct direction,” which indicates that he has not set serious conditions for negotiations and still wishes to pursue his maximalist goals.

Putin’s December 25 statement is a part of a deliberate information campaign aimed at misleading the West to push Ukraine into making preliminary concessions. The Kremlin did not publish the full transcript of Putin’s interview on its official website in contrast with its normal pattern, possibly to facilitate the misrepresentation of Putin’s full statement originally broadcasted in Russian and highlight his vague statement on negotiations.³ The Kremlin’s use of the interview clip on the Christmas holiday may also be a response to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky’s recent speech at the US Congress amidst the holiday season.⁴ The Kremlin has been intensifying this information campaign throughout December.

Putin is likely concerned over the lack of support for his war in Ukraine among elites and may be setting information conditions for the nationalization of their property. Putin pointed out that there are people in Russia who act solely in their self-interest when responding to a relatively positive interview question on his sentiments toward Russians’ commitment to the war.⁵ Putin added that 99.9% of Russians would sacrifice everything for the “motherland.” Putin’s instant criticism of some members of society suggests that he is focused on those who do not fully support the war rather than on those who do. Putin made similar statements last week, noting that some businessmen who drain Russia’s money aboard are a “danger” to Russia.⁶ Putin’s statements are also consistent with the Russian State Duma’s preparations to introduce a bill to increase tax rates for Russians who had left the country after the start of the “special military operation,” likely as a form of punishment for evading the war effort.⁷ The Kremlin will likely use funds generated through the tax to fund its war in Ukraine.

Ukrainian intelligence reported that a Wagner Group-linked Russian officer was appointed commander of the Russian Western Military District (WMD). The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on December 26 that former Chief of Staff of the Eastern Military District Lieutenant General Evgeny Valerivich Nikiforov was appointed as the new commander of the WMD and that Nikiforov is commanding the Russian western grouping of forces in Ukraine out of a command post in Boguchar, Voronezh Oblast.⁸ The report states that Nikiforov replaced Colonel General Sergey Kuzovlev as WMD commander (November – December 2022) because Nikiforov is a member of the internal Russian *silovik* alliance

formed by Commander of the Russian Armed Forces in Ukraine Army General Sergey Surovikin and Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin. Ukrainian intelligence previously reported that Prigozhin formed an alliance with Surovikin and that both Prigozhin and Surovikin are rivals of Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu.⁹

Nikiforov has previous experience commanding Wagner Group elements in Donbas in 2014 – 2015. A Bellingcat investigation found that Wagner founder Dmitry Utkin reported to Nikiforov – among other Russian military intelligence officials – when Nikiforov was the Chief of Staff of the Russian 58th Combined Arms Army in 2015.¹⁰ A Ukrainian State Security Service (SBU) investigation found that Nikiforov ordered Utkin and his Wagner Group to destroy a Ukrainian Il-76 transport plane on June 14, 2014.¹¹

Ukrainian strikes on legitimate military targets far in the Russian rear continue to be points of neuralgia for the Russian milblogger community. Russian sources began reporting explosions near the Engels Airbase in Saratov Oblast on the night of December 25 and the morning of December 26.¹² The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated that Russian air defense shot down a Ukrainian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) that was approaching the Engels airfield at low altitude and that the wreckage of the UAV killed three Russian servicemen.¹³ Several prominent Russian milbloggers latched onto the Russian MoD report on the incident as an opportunity to criticize domestic Russian air defense capabilities and question Russian authorities' handling of and response to reported Ukrainian strikes deep in the Russian rear. One Wagner Group-affiliated milblogger questioned why Russian air defense only “miraculously” prevents strikes “exactly above the airfield/military unit” and noted that the Engels airfield is 500km into Russian territory.¹⁴ Former militant commander and prominent Russian milblogger Igor Girkin sarcastically congratulated Russian air defense for activating before striking the airbase and questioned why Russia is allowing Ukrainian drones so deep into its territory.¹⁵ Several Russian milbloggers also criticized the technical capabilities of Russian air defense and electronic warfare systems and voiced their concern over Russian authorities' inability to protect critical Russian infrastructure.¹⁶ Prominent voices in the pro-war information space will likely continue to seize on perceived attacks on Russian domestic security to criticize Russian military capabilities and leadership and call for escalated actions against Ukraine.

Key Takeaways

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin did not offer to negotiate with Ukraine on December 25 contrary to some reporting.**
- **Putin is likely concerned over the lack of support for his war in Ukraine among elites and may be setting information conditions for the nationalization of their property.**
- **Ukrainian intelligence reported that a Wagner Group-linked Russian officer was appointed commander of the Russian Western Military District (WMD).**
- **Ukrainian strikes on legitimate military targets far in the Russian rear continue to be points of neuralgia for the Russian milblogger community.**
- **Russian and Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line.**
- **Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian troops are fighting near Kreminna.**
- **Russian sources claimed that Russian forces made limited gains northeast of Bakhmut.**
- **Russian forces continued ground attacks on the western outskirts of Donetsk City.**
- **Ukrainian military officials indicated that Russian forces may be concentrating some unspecified forces for offensive or demonstration operations in Zaporizhia Oblast and that Russian forces are attempting to conduct small-scale reconnaissance-in-force operations to reach right-bank Kherson Oblast.**
- **Russian officials and nationalists began to criticize the Kremlin's lenient migration and passportization policies for Central Asian migrants.**

- **Russia is continuing efforts to consolidate control of occupied territories in Ukraine through the manipulation of citizenship procedures.**

We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because those 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 population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn these Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict, Geneva Conventions, and humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.

- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and one supporting effort);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Activities in Russian-occupied Areas

Ukrainian Counteroffensives (Ukrainian efforts to liberate Russian-occupied territories)

Eastern Ukraine: (Eastern Kharkiv Oblast-Western Luhansk Oblast)

Russian forces continued counterattacks to regain lost positions northwest of Svatove on December 25 and 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked towards Lyman Pershyi (50 km northwest of Svatove), Stelmakhivka (15km west of Svatove), and Novoselivske (15km northwest of Svatove) on December 25.¹⁷ Russian milbloggers remarked that Russian troops continued attacks in these areas on December 26.¹⁸ Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR) Deputy Interior Minister Vitaly Kiselyov claimed that Russian forces took control of Masiutivka (50km northwest of Svatove) on December 26, but ISW has not observed visual confirmation to corroborate this claim.¹⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are continuing offensive actions near Svatove and maintaining a stable pace of progress to make measured meter-by-meter advances.²⁰ Russian sources highlighted purported Ukrainian losses near Svatove and claimed that Ukrainian troops are transferring manpower and equipment to the area to compensate for massive personnel losses.²¹

Russian and Ukrainian forces continued offensive operations along the Svatove-Kreminna line between December 25 and 26. The Ukrainian General Staff noted that Ukrainian troops repelled Russian attacks near Ploshchanka (16km northwest of Kreminna), Chervonopopivka (5km north of Kreminna), and Nevske (17km northwest of Kreminna) on December 25 and 26.²² Russian milbloggers noted that the Russian forces along the Svatove-Kreminna line are comprised of mobilized elements from Moscow Oblast, as well as elements of the 144th Motor Rifle Division of the 20th Combined Arms Army of the Western Military District and the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District.²³ This composite force grouping suggests that Russian forces are pulling troops from various points throughout the theater to fill holes in the Svatove-Kreminna line and compensate for the continued degradation of conventional units. Russian sources also claimed that Ukrainian troops attempted to attack Russian positions near Kreminna and that elements of the Russian Legion and the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District repelled Ukrainian attempts near Kreminna.²⁴ Ukrainian Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai noted on December 26 that hostilities are taking place “not far” from Kreminna and that the Russian command in Kreminna has evacuated to Rubizhne, about 10km southeast of Kreminna and further behind the line of contact.²⁵ Haidai denied reports that Ukrainian forces liberated Kreminna and urged patience.²⁶ Russian milbloggers accused Ukrainian sources of “inflating” claims of success near Kreminna and called such reports an active information operation.²⁷

Ukrainian troops continued to strike Russian concentration areas in rear areas of Luhansk Oblast. The Ukrainian General Staff confirmed on December 26 that Ukrainian forces struck a Russian manpower concentration near

Polovynkyne, a settlement on the southern outskirts of Starobilsk and along the H21 Starobilsk-Luhansk City highway.²⁸ Russian sources additionally claimed that Ukrainian artillery strikes hit Rubizhne (just southeast of Kreminna) and Shchastia (20km north of Luhansk City) on December 25.²⁹

Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine

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

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on December 25 and 26. Donetsk Oblast Head Pavlo Kyrylenko noted on December 26 that the pace of Russian offensives on Bakhmut has not slowed and that Russian troops are deploying forces to the area and potentially raising additional reserves.³⁰ Kyrylenko’s observation may contradict ISW’s December 24 assessment that the pace of Russian offensives on Bakhmut has slowed in recent days, although it does not necessarily contradict ISW’s forecast that Russian troops may seek to initiate a tactical pause or slowdown in operations to regroup in this area.³¹ The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 25 and 26 that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful ground attacks on Bakhmut itself; northeast of Bakhmut near Vesele, Yakovlivka, Soledar, Bakhmutske and Pidhorodne; and south of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka, Kurdiuivka, Mayorsk, and Pivnichne.³² Russian milbloggers claimed that Wagner Group fighters launched an offensive northeast of Bakhmut towards Soledar and took control of a school between Bakhmutske and Soledar and cleared Ukrainian strongholds on the outskirts of Pidhorodne on December 26.³³ Social media footage posted on December 25 shows Ukrainian troops fighting south of Bakhmut in Opytne, and Russian milbloggers continued to discuss Russian operations in this area.³⁴ Former militant commander and prominent Russian milblogger Igor Girkin noted that Ukrainian troops have had eight years to prepare defenses south of Bakhmut and that Russian forces are unlikely to advance in this area beyond marginal tactical gains.³⁵

Russian forces continued offensive operations along the western outskirts of Donetsk City on December 25 and 26. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian troops conducted unsuccessful ground attacks on Krasnohorivka, Vesele, Vodiane, and Marinka (all ranging from the northwestern to southwest outskirts of Donetsk City) between December 25 and 26.³⁶ Geolocated combat footage posted on December 26 shows Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) forces taking control of a Ukrainian fortification about 8km north of Avdiivka.³⁷ Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian troops additionally attacked Nevelske and Pervomaiske (both just northwest of Donetsk City) and Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City) on December 25.³⁸ Russian sources continued to discuss reported Russian advances within Marinka and claimed that Russian troops, including elements of the 150th Motor Rifle Division of the 8th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District, are pushing Ukrainian troops to the western outskirts of the settlement.³⁹ Russian sources continued to claim that Ukrainian forces conducted limited counterattacks southwest of Donetsk City to regain lost positions in the Vuhledar area.⁴⁰

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

Ukrainian military officials indicated that Russian forces may be concentrating some unspecified forces for offensive or demonstrative operations in Zaporizhia Oblast. The Head of the Ukrainian Joint Press Center of the Tavrisk Direction Defense Forces, Yevhen Yerin, stated that Russian forces are gathering forces in unspecified areas that could be formations for an offensive operation.⁴¹ Yerin noted that this group occasionally changes its positions but that the Russian command has not yet chosen a specific operational direction. Yerin added that it is unclear if the Russian military command will use this group for demonstration actions or in preparation for an offensive operation and stated that Ukrainian forces have not observed a significant increase in forces in Zaporizhia Oblast at this time. Russian occupation officials and milbloggers amplified reports that Russian forces finalized construction of fortifications along the Zaporizhia Oblast frontline on December 25.⁴² A Russian milblogger also commented on Ukrainian reports that Russian forces are engineering positions around

Melitopol, noting that Russian forces gathered a lot of military equipment in the city “as if they are preparing for the battle of the century.”⁴³

Ukrainian military officials reported that Russian forces are attempting to conduct small-scale reconnaissance-in-force operations to reach right-bank Kherson Oblast.⁴⁴ Spokesperson for the Ukrainian Southern Defense Forces, Nataliya Humenyuk, also stated that Russian forces are continuing to lose positions in unspecified areas, while Ukrainian forces are maintaining artillery fire to prevent additional personnel from reinforcing advanced Russian groupings.⁴⁵ Humenyuk added that Ukrainian forces are continuing unspecified combat operations against Russian forces on Kinburn Spit, while Russian forces are using their positions on the spit to shell port areas in Mykolaiv Oblast. Russian forces are continuing to target liberated settlements and Ukrainian positions in right-bank Kherson, Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Zaporizhia oblasts.⁴⁶ Russian forces also continued to shell the densely populated cities of Beryslav and Kherson.⁴⁷

Ukrainian forces continued to strike Russian targets in southern Ukraine. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces struck Russian headquarters in Zabaryne (approximately 30km southwest of Kherson City) during a meeting of Southern Military District (SMD) officers.⁴⁸ The strike reportedly injured up to 70 Russian servicemen. The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that a Ukrainian strike on an unnamed location in occupied Kherson Oblast killed up to 50 Russian servicemen and wounded up to 100 troops.⁴⁹ Ukrainian local officials and social media users also reported that Ukrainian forces struck Russian military equipment in Oleshky and Chaplynka, 10km and 67km southeast of Kherson City respectively.⁵⁰

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

Russian officials and nationalists began to criticize the Kremlin’s migration and passportization policies for Central Asian migrants aimed at incentivizing force generation efforts. The Tajik branch of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)* reported on December 22 that the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) offered Russian passports to more than 119,000 Tajiks between January and September, with the number of acquired citizenships peaking in July-September.⁵¹ An expert told *RFE/RL* that Russian officials had simplified the acquisition of citizenship for Central Asian migrants by allowing them to sign a contract with Russian Armed Forces in exchange for a passport. ISW previously reported that the Kremlin initiated a volunteer recruitment campaign between June and September in which federal officials offered citizenship, social benefits, and one-time enlistment bonuses to migrants in exchange for participation in the war.⁵² The report upset several prominent Russian milbloggers who had made xenophobic remarks that these 119,000 migrants from Tajikistan will never integrate into Russian society, will form their own diasporas that hate Russians, and are already committing violent crimes in Russia.⁵³ One prominent milblogger complained that thousands of people of “foreign culture and ideology” aim to exploit Russian charity while viewing Russia as a colonizing power.⁵⁴

The Russian MVD felt compelled to respond to and deflect criticism from Russian nationalists regarding immigration spikes among Central Asian nationals. Head of the MVD Vladimir Kolokoltsev stated that 16 Russian ministries are migration beneficiaries, but that “society only questions the MVD” over these migration concerns.⁵⁵ Kolokoltsev also reinforced the nationalists’ xenophobic rhetoric by claiming that most criminal offense committed by Central Asian migrants are related to drug trafficking. Such rhetoric may foster societal tensions and does not reflect Putin’s repeated portrayal of Russia as an equal and tolerant society.⁵⁶

Russian President Vladimir Putin has been increasing his interactions with the Russian military-industrial complex, likely in false hopes that Russia can recreate that Soviet Union’s production capabilities. Putin had been visiting several defense factories and had met with the heads of the Russian military industrial complex during the past week.⁵⁷ Putin had also appointed Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council Dmitry Medvedev to a new position of First Deputy Chairman of the Military Industrial Commission responsible for coordinating weapons production for the Russian Armed Forces.⁵⁸

Russians continue to express confusion and concern over Russian partial mobilization and force generation efforts. A Russian news outlet reported that Russians had viewed an official partial mobilization FAQ tab over 50 million times and have viewed an official “special military operation” FAQ website over 239 million times.⁵⁹ A few Russians are continuing to commit arson against Russian military recruitment centers likely in protest of Russia’s force generation efforts. Former United Russia parliamentarian Daniil Akimov set a military enlistment office on fire in Saratov, badly damaging the building.⁶⁰ The Russian military command is attempting to tighten its grip on Russian saboteurs, however, and reclassified one of the attacks on a military recruitment center in Nizhnevartovsk, Khanty-Mansi Republic as a terrorist act.⁶¹

Russian officials have expressed an interest in creating additional military training centers across the country, but Russia is unlikely to be able to recruit sufficient trainers to staff these facilities without compromising the ongoing war effort in Ukraine. Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuriy Trutnev stated that Russia plans to create special forces training grounds analogous to the SPETZNAZ University in the Republic of Chechnya.⁶² Russian officials will need to withdraw some of their most experienced fighters from the frontlines in Ukraine to staff these centers.

Activity in Russian-occupied Areas (Russian objective: consolidate administrative control of and annexed areas; forcibly integrate Ukrainian civilians into Russian sociocultural, economic, military, and governance systems)

Russia is continuing efforts to consolidate control of occupied territories in Ukraine through the manipulation of citizenship procedures. Russian President Vladimir Putin approved a decree on December 26 that simplifies the procedure for submitting certain applications related to citizenship procedures for residents of Kherson, Zaporizhia, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts.⁶³ The decree clarifies procedures for application for Russian passports, the recognition of children under 14 years old as Russian citizens and filing and recording applications for the renunciation of Ukrainian citizenship (presumably without seeking Russian citizenship).⁶⁴ This decree essentially codifies various avenues for acquiring Russian citizenship, and likely indicates a widespread unwillingness of residents of occupied areas to apply for Russian passports. This notably undermines the Kremlin narrative of widespread support for Russian citizenship in annexed areas of Ukraine.⁶⁵

Russian occupation authorities are continuing to intensify law enforcement activities and restrictions on movement in occupied areas in response to Ukrainian partisan activities. Spokesperson for Ukraine’s Southern Operational Command, Nataliya Humenyuk, stated on December 25 that Russian occupation elements are strengthening the police regimes in Hornostaivka, Kherson Oblast, and Vasylivka, Zaporizhia Oblast, due to continued pressure levied by Ukrainian partisans.⁶⁶ The Ukrainian General Staff similarly noted on December 26 that Russian forces in Tokmak, Zaporizhia Oblast, are working with local collaborators to search the population for pro-Ukrainian sentiments and are checking personal laptops, phones, and residences.⁶⁷ The Ukrainian Resistance Center noted that Russian forces in occupied areas are kidnapping Ukrainian citizens in order to search for partisan elements and extract confessions on the underground movement.⁶⁸ Ukrainian sources widely reported on continued restriction of movement out of occupied areas on December 25 and 26.⁶⁹

Russian authorities are continuing to employ various social guises to justify the transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia and other Russian-occupied areas. Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevheny Balitsky posted a picture on December 25 reportedly of children from occupied Zaporizhia Oblast in Moscow and stated that 240 children arrived in Moscow to see the Kremlin’s Christmas tree as part of the “New Years with Big Changes” youth engagement scheme.⁷⁰ It is unclear whether and under what circumstances these children will return to Zaporizhia Oblast. ISW has previously reported on Russian efforts to transfer Ukrainian children to Russia under the guise of participation in youth education and civil service programs.⁷¹

Russian occupation officials are reportedly using religious institutions to consolidate social control of occupied areas. The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on December 26 that Russian authorities began to “integrate” churches in occupied areas by only allowing Kremlin-affiliated churches to remain active.⁷² The Resistance Center noted that this “integration” is carried out by a program that is financed through grants from the Russian Presidential Administration.⁷³ ISW has previously reported that Kremlin-backed elements of the Moscow Patriate of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC MP) supported Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and the current war.⁷⁴ Russian occupation authorities are likely working with the UOC MP and other similarly Kremlin-linked religious organs to build the veneer of religious legitimacy and therefore consolidate social control of occupied areas.

ISW will continue to report out daily observed indicators consistent with the current assessed most dangerous course of action (MDCOA): a renewed invasion of northern Ukraine possibly aimed at Kyiv.

ISW’s December 15 MDCOA warning forecast about a potential Russian offensive against northern Ukraine in winter 2023 remains a worst-case scenario within the forecast cone. ISW currently assesses the risk of a Russian invasion of Ukraine from Belarus as low, but possible, and the risk of Belarusian direct involvement as very low. This new section in the daily update is not in itself a forecast or assessment. It lays out the daily observed indicators we are using to refine our assessments and forecasts, which we expect to update regularly. Our assessment that the MDCOA remains unlikely has not changed. We will update this header if and when the assessment changes.

Observed indicators for the MDCOA in the past 48 hours:

- Nothing significant to report.

Observed ambiguous indicators for MDCOA in the past 48 hours:

- Ukrainian Air Force Command Spokesperson Yuriy Ihnat stated on December 25 that an unspecified number of Russian MiG-31 interceptors returned to an unspecified airfield in Belarus after redeploying to Russia for a few weeks.⁷⁵ Russia reportedly deployed three MiG-31K interceptors to the Belarusian airfield in Machulishchy on December 13.⁷⁶
- The Head of the Main Directorate of Ideology at the Belarusian Ministry of Defense Leonid Kasinsky stated on December 25 that the Iskander tactical ballistic missile systems and the S-400 air defense systems that Russia deployed to Belarus are on active combat duty and are fully prepared to perform unspecified “tasks for their intended purpose.”⁷⁷

Observed counter-indicators for the MDCOA in the past 48 hours:

- The Ukrainian General Staff reiterated that it has not observed Russian forces in Belarus forming a strike group as of December 26.⁷⁸
- Chief of the Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Kyrylo Budanov stated on December 26 that that he does not expect fundamental changes in the situation soon and that Russian forces are concentrating forces north of Bakhmut and in the Zaporizhia direction.⁷⁹
- Head of the Ukrainian Joint Press Center of the Tavrisk Direction Defense Forces Yevhen Yerin stated on December 26 that the Russian military is gathering forces that can support an offensive on December 26 but did not specify where: “The [Russian military] did not choose any specific direction or area. It changes positions from time to time, so whether it is a demonstration force or preparation for an offensive, it is still difficult to say.”⁸⁰
- Geolocated footage posted on December 25 shows a train with at least seven tanks in Kamensk-Shakhtynsky, Rostov Oblast reportedly heading to the Donetsk or Luhansk area of operations.⁸¹ Russian equipment

deployments to Luhansk are consistent with ISW's assessment that the Russian military is likely setting conditions for an offensive in northwestern Luhansk Oblast.⁸²

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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- ¹ <https://smotrim dot ru/video/2536499>
- ² <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-22>
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<https://t.me/readovkanews/49597>; <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/duma-prepares-higher-taxation-russians-who-left-country-speaker-2022-12-25/>
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- ⁹ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-24>
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<https://t.me/strelkovii/3612>; <https://t.me/vladlentarsky/18324>; https://t.me/aleksandr_skif/2529
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³¹ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar122422>

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