

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 18, 2023

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January 18, 8:00 pm 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.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech commemorating the Soviet forces' breaking of the siege of Leningrad illustrated that he remains uncertain about his ability to significantly shape the Russian information space. Putin used his January 18 speech to reiterate standard and longstanding Kremlin rhetoric that falsely maintains that Russia launched the invasion of Ukraine to protect residents in the Donbas from neo-Nazis who, the Kremlin claims, seized control of the Ukrainian government in 2014.¹ Putin did not use the publicity of the event to make any announcements concerning the war in Ukraine, such as a new mobilization wave or a formal declaration of war, which some Russian milbloggers had floated.² Putin has notably declined to use several high-profile public addresses, including his annual New Year's Speech and his canceled annual address to the Russian Federation Assembly, to make any notable new announcements about the war.³ Putin likely reiterated standard Kremlin rhetoric because it has resonated well with the Russian ultra-nationalist pro-war community, elements of which have been increasingly critical of his conduct of the war.⁴ Putin may seek to shape the Russian information space over time, but he appears to be unwilling or unable to attempt a dramatic speech that represents a significant inflection in his rhetoric.

Putin's speech is likely part of a larger and relatively new informational effort to wrap the "special military operation" inside the greater Russian national mythos of the Great Patriotic War (the Second World War) to increase Russian support for a protracted war and increasing mobilization. Putin's speech was symbolically significant for the Russian domestic audience. Putin is fond of using symbolic dates and historical analogies to address the Russian people and delivered this speech in St. Petersburg to commemorate the 80th anniversary of Soviet forces breaking the Nazi siege of Leningrad. Putin said that Soviet forces defeated Nazi Germany's "genocide of Leningrad" and drew comparisons with how contemporary Russia is fighting "Ukrainian neo-Nazis" in Donbas—where Putin previously accused Ukraine of conducting a genocide to justify his 2022 invasion.⁵ Putin likely seeks to shape the information space over time to regenerate support for the invasion and for maintaining a protracted war by reintroducing pre-February 24 narratives about "Ukrainian neo-Nazis" and "genocide of Russians" to regain control over war coverage after having largely ceded this space to a variety of quasi-independent actors.⁶

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov augmented these efforts to increase Russian support for a protracted war by explicitly claiming that Ukraine and the West are pursuing the genocide of the Russian people. Lavrov accused the West of assembling a coalition of European countries to use Ukraine as a proxy in a war that aims to solve the "Russian question" in the same way that Adolf Hitler had sought a "final solution" to eradicate Europe's Jewish population.⁷ Lavrov argued that Western officials' desire for the strategic defeat of Russia is tantamount to the genocide of the Russian people.⁸ Lavrov likely made the comments to set more explicit information conditions for a protracted war by framing the war in Ukraine as just as existential for Russians as Nazi Germany's invasion of the Soviet Union in the Second World War. Lavrov's comments are far more noteworthy than Putin's speech, which may suggest that the Kremlin is instructing high-ranking

officials to attempt to substantially shape the Russian information space for a protracted war, and open themselves to criticism, instead of having Putin do so himself.

Lavrov's equations of the West with Nazi Germany and its support for Ukraine with an effort to exterminate the Russian people are ludicrous and almost certainly aimed at a domestic Russian audience. Ukraine has never threatened to invade or seize territory beyond the internationally recognized borders of 1991. Neither NATO as an alliance nor any individual member state has threatened to invade Russia, let alone to pursue the destruction of Russians as a people. The purpose of Lavrov's outrageous and absurd comparison was very likely meant to complement Putin's rhetoric and other Russian efforts to persuade the Russian people that Ukraine and its Western backers pose a real and imminent threat to Russian territory and to the Russian people in their homes. Russian governments, the Wagner Private Military Company, and the Russian military have dug trenches and established militias in areas bordering Ukraine for months, ostensibly to defend against the nonexistent threat of a Ukrainian invasion.⁹ These efforts, together with Putin's and Lavrov's statements wrapping themselves in the banners of the Red Army waging the Great Patriotic Special Military Operation, are meant to galvanize support for protracted mobilization and suffering in pursuit of Putin's unprovoked aggression and search for territorial conquest.

Putin and Lavrov continue to deny Ukrainian sovereignty and outright reject direct negotiations with Ukraine. Putin emphasized in his speech that Russia is fighting to protect people who live in its "historical territories" in Ukraine, a continuation of Kremlin rhetoric that rejects Ukrainian sovereignty and seeks to justify Putin's maximalist goals of territorial acquisition in Ukraine.¹⁰ Lavrov explicitly stated that "there can be no talk of negotiations with [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelensky" and argued that Western insistence on Ukraine's involvement in negotiations is "nonsense" as the West is in charge of making decisions in Ukraine.¹¹ Lavrov stated that the Kremlin would respond seriously to any noteworthy proposals from the United States.¹² Lavrov's and Putin's statements are indicative of ongoing Russian information operations that aim to reject Ukraine's sovereignty and delegitimize Kyiv's right to negotiate, shifting the onus for negotiations onto Western officials, whom the Kremlin believes to be more willing to offer concessions that Ukraine could not accept and could seek to compel Ukrainian officials to negotiate on terms more favorable to Russia.¹³

Putin continues efforts to reinvigorate Russia's defense industrial base to support a protracted war in Ukraine. Putin visited workers at the Obukhov State Plant—part of the Almaz-Antey Russian state-owned defense industrial company—on January 18.¹⁴ Putin stated that the Russian defense industry currently can produce more than it could previously in an unspecified past time frame and stated that Russia will achieve the defense industrial production level that Russia needs.¹⁵ Putin acknowledged that workers at the Obukhov factory work three shifts a day and reiterated that defense industry workers were exempted from mobilization, likely because Putin needs to keep specialized workers in Russia's defense industrial base.¹⁶ Putin also used this visit to draw historical parallels between the Great Patriotic War and the current war in Ukraine. Putin and Obukhov workers discussed how over 6,500 workers at the Obukhov plant died during the Great Patriotic War and how Russia is "absolutely justified" in fighting against neo-Nazis in Ukraine today.¹⁷

Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is becoming increasingly bold in his verbal attacks against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD). Prigozhin criticized the MoD's new guidelines for Russian troops in Ukraine that restrict the use of certain personal electronic devices in combat zones and set stricter guidelines for men's grooming standards on January 18.¹⁸ Prigozhin

defended Russian line soldiers who do not adhere to grooming standards (Prigozhin observed that beards are customary for many Muslim and Orthodox Christian fighters) and claimed that soldiers' use of smartphones and tablets is necessary for modern warfare.¹⁹ Prigozhin stated that "war is the time of the active and courageous, and not of the clean-shaven who turned in phones to the warehouse."²⁰ Prigozhin further criticized out-of-touch Russian MoD officials who must "develop along with the development of modern warfare, learn how to effectively kill the enemy and seize territories," and not "comb everyone under your ridiculous rules, principles and whims."²¹ Prigozhin's statement was the latest of several designed to undermine confidence in the MoD and promote Prigozhin as the face of the Russian "special military operation" in Ukraine.²² Prigozhin's comments reflect a cowboy approach to war that is unsuited to the development and maintenance of an effective large-scale and disciplined modern military.

Prigozhin directly attacked Russian President Vladimir Putin's presidential administration and insinuated that some officials working there are traitors who want Russia to lose the war in Ukraine—one of Prigozhin's boldest attacks against the Kremlin to date.²³ Prigozhin weighed in on an ongoing Russian policy debate about banning YouTube and stated that some officials in the Kremlin presidential administration oppose banning YouTube because it would undermine their effort to have the United States and Russia reestablish relations after Russia loses the war in Ukraine.²⁴ Prigozhin stated that such officials think that the United States will "forgive [Russia] its sins" of supporting "pro-Russian interests" and "supporting Putin" if Russia begs for Western forgiveness after losing the war.²⁵ Prigozhin called these officials "traitors of the people" who proclaim exalted pro-Russian values but nevertheless live and vacation abroad and "support the West in every possible way."²⁶

Prigozhin and other notable voices in Russia are carving out a new space to criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin without fear of retribution. Prigozhin and other prominent Russian nationalists such as Igor Girkin, a former Russian militant commander and prominent critical voice in the Russian milblogger information space, have been opening a new sector in the Russian information space where certain figures can criticize Putin and the highest echelons of the Russian government without any apparent retribution. Igor Girkin heavily implied that he would support the removal of Russian President Vladimir Putin from office in his most direct criticism of Putin to date on January 10, for example.²⁷ Putin has decided to not censor these voices for far.

A helicopter transporting Ukrainian Ministry of Internal Affairs officials crashed in a residential area in Brovary, Kyiv Oblast on January 18. Ukraine's State Emergency Service announced that the crash killed 16, including Ukrainian Interior Minister Denys Monastyrsky and three children, and injured 30, including 16 children.²⁸ The crash damaged a local kindergarten and a large residential building.²⁹ Ukrainian authorities have not yet specified the cause of the crash.³⁰

Key Takeaways

- **Russian President Vladimir Putin's speech commemorating the siege of Leningrad continued to illustrate that Putin remains uncertain about his ability to significantly shape the Russian information space.**
- **Putin's speech is likely part of a larger informational effort to wrap the "special military operation" inside the greater Russian national mythos of the Great**

Patriotic War (the Second World War) to increase Russian support for a protracted war and mobilization.

- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov augmented these efforts to increase Russian support for a protracted war by explicitly and ludicrously claiming that Ukraine and the West are pursuing the genocide of the Russian people.**
- **Putin continues efforts to reinvigorate Russia's defense industrial base to support a protracted war in Ukraine.**
- **Putin and Lavrov continue to deny Ukrainian sovereignty and outright reject direct negotiations with Ukraine.**
- **Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin is becoming increasingly bold in his verbal attacks against the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) and the Kremlin.**
- **Prigozhin and other notable voices in Russia are carving out a new space to criticize Russian President Vladimir Putin without fear of retribution.**
- **Russian forces continued limited counterattacks to regain lost positions near Kreminna.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations near Soledar, Bakhmut, Avdiivka, and Donetsk City.**
- **The Russian MoD continues to attempt to downplay the role of the Wagner Group in claimed tactical advances in the Soledar area.**
- **Ukrainian officials have indicated that Russian forces are concentrating in Zaporizhia Oblast, possibly for a large defensive or offensive effort.**
- **Russian forces' increasing use of incendiary munitions to conduct what appear to be otherwise routine strikes in southern Ukraine supports ISW's recent assessment that Russian forces likely face a shortage of conventional artillery rounds.**
- **Ukrainian and Russian sources continued to indicate that Russian authorities are likely preparing for a second wave of mobilization.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of January 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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.

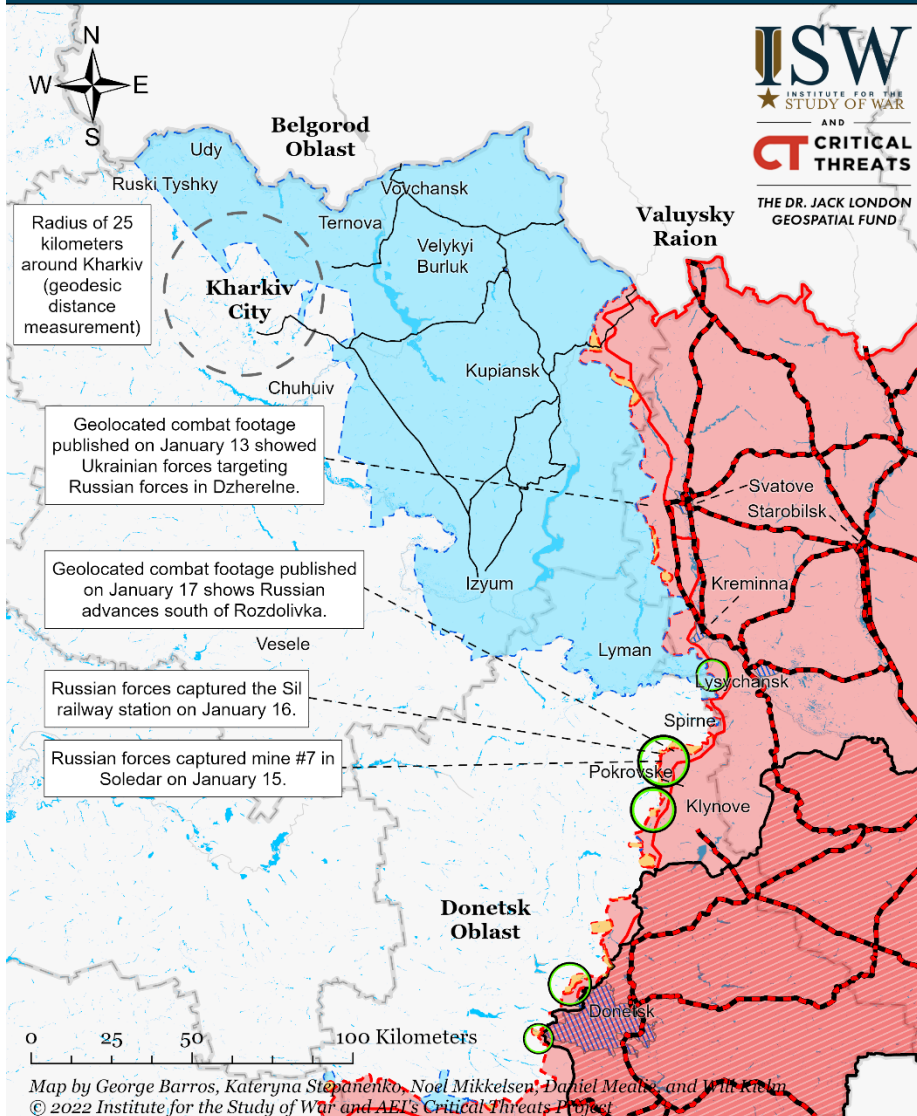
- Ukrainian Counteroffensives—Eastern Ukraine
- Russian Main Effort—Eastern Ukraine (comprised of one subordinate and one supporting effort);
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort—Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort—Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation 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 limited counterattacks to regain lost positions near Kreminna on January 18. Geolocated footage published on January 18 indicates that Russian forces have made marginal advances south of Ploshchanka (17km northwest of Kreminna).³¹ Luhansk Oblast Head Serhiy Haidai stated on January 18 that Russian forces attempted to counterattack near Kreminna but that Russian forces are unlikely to launch a counteroffensive in the area in the near future.³² Haidai also stated that Russian forces are transferring equipment to the other side of the Krasna River, which flows through Kreminna, in preparation for defensive operations and that Russian forces are continuing to move reserves to the Svatove-Kreminna line.³³ Geolocated footage published on January 17 shows Russian forces moving reserves and military equipment near Severodonetsk (15km southeast of Kreminna).³⁴ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault near Bilohorivka (12km south of Kreminna).³⁵

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kharkiv as of January 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

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

The Ukrainian Main Defense Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine published an audio intercept on December 22 in which a Russian soldier operating in the vicinity of Chervonopopivka supported reports that Ukrainian forces captured part of the R-66 Kreminna-Svatove road in the vicinity of Zhytlivka (just south of Chervonopopivka). The Ukrainian General Staff has repeatedly reported since November 30 that Russian forces shelled Chervonopopivka, indicating Russian forces no longer control Chervonopopivka. The Russian Ministry of Defense claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attempted to establish a position in Chervonopopivka on November 27, indicating Ukrainian maneuvers near Chervonopopivka. The R-66 runs through Chervonopopivka and the road's capture by Ukrainian forces would be consistent with the evidence presented in the intercepted phone call plus the Ukrainian General Staff's reports.

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)

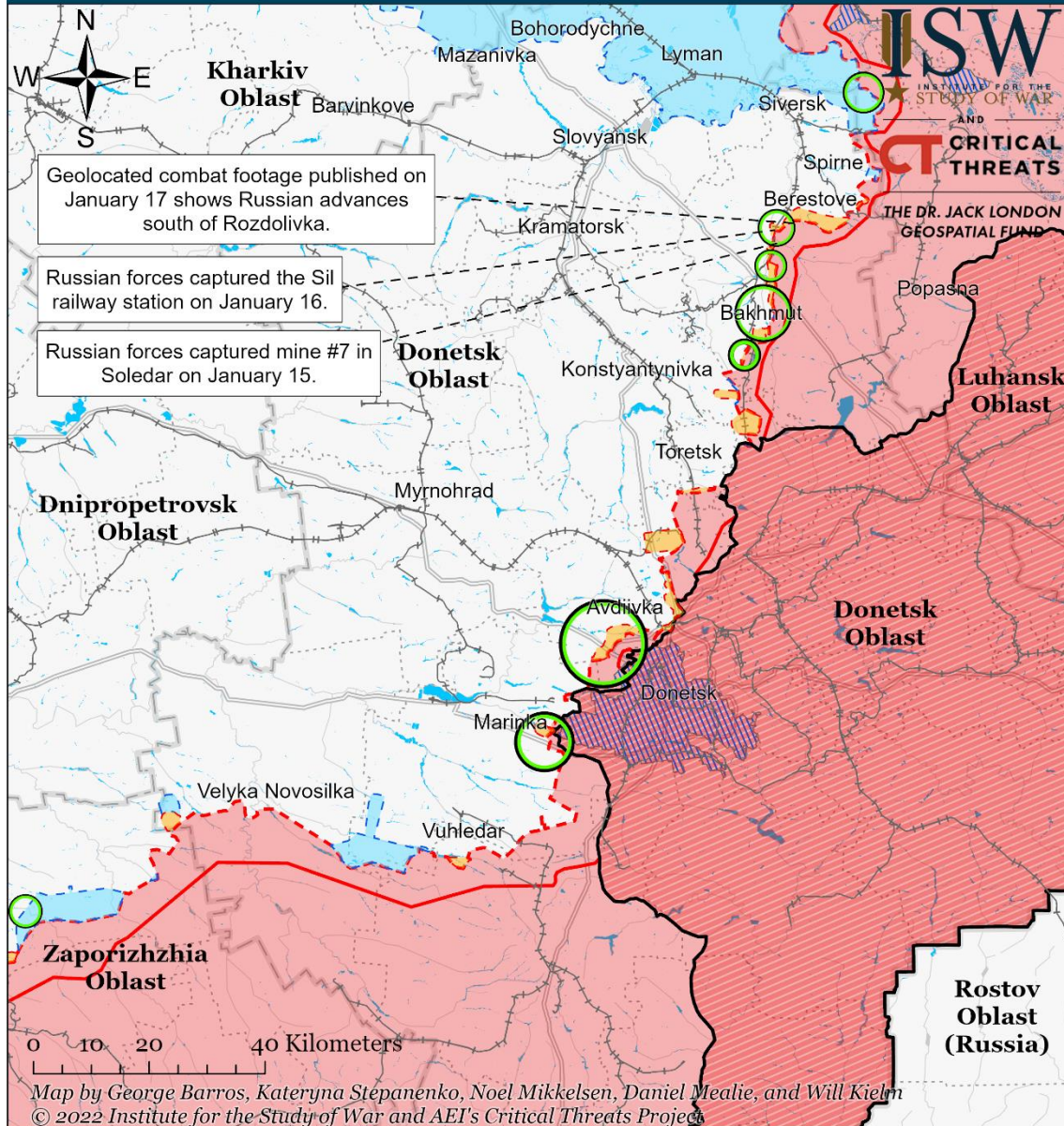
Russian forces continued offensive operations around Soledar on January 18. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces attempted to advance towards Verkhokamianske (20km northeast of Soledar), Spirne (18km northeast of Soledar), and Krasnopolivka (3km north of Soledar).³⁶ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault near Sil (3km northwest of Soledar).³⁷ The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian "volunteers of assault detachments" captured Sil, although ISW still cannot independently verify Russian claims that Russian forces control the settlement.³⁸ The United Kingdom Ministry of Defense (UK MoD) reported that Ukrainian forces withdrew from Soledar by the end of January 16 and that they continue to defend against Russian forces on the outskirts of the settlement.³⁹ Geolocated footage posted on January 18 indicates that Russian forces have likely advanced further west of Soledar in Dvorichchia (2km west of Soledar).⁴⁰ The Ukrainian General Staff also reported that Ukrainian forces repelled a Russian assault near Krasna Hora (5km southwest of Soledar).⁴¹

The Russian MoD continues to attempt to downplay the role of the Wagner Group in claimed tactical advances in the Soledar area. The Russian MoD’s use of "volunteers of assault detachments" to describe the formations that supposedly captured Sil likely refers to Wagner Group fighters. The Kremlin previously challenged Wagner Group financier Yevgeny Prigozhin’s claim that Wagner Group forces were solely responsible for capturing Soledar.⁴² The Russian MoD faced significant backlash when it failed initially to acknowledge the Wagner Group in its announcement of the capture of Soledar.⁴³ The Russian MoD is likely using odd language to simultaneously shield itself from criticism that it is not acknowledging the Wagner Group while also downplaying the Wagner Group’s role in tactical advances in the Soledar area.

Russian forces continued offensive operations around Bakhmut on January 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults near Bakhmut itself and Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).⁴⁴ A Russian milblogger claimed that Wagner Group fighters attempted to advance to the western outskirts of Klishchiivka and are engaged in fierce battles with Ukrainian forces near the settlement.⁴⁵ The Russian milblogger also claimed that Russian forces attempted to advance towards Pivnichne (22km southwest of Bakhmut).⁴⁶

Russian forces continued offensive operations in the Avdiivka-Donetsk City area on January 18. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled Russian assaults within 32km southwest of Avdiivka near Vodyane, Nevelske, Marinka, and Pobieda.⁴⁷ A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces unsuccessfully attempted to cut a road that runs through part of Ukrainian-controlled Marinka.⁴⁸ Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov claimed that an Akhmat Special Forces Regiment successfully stormed a Ukrainian stronghold in the direction of Marinka.⁴⁹ A Russian milblogger claimed that the stronghold was located south of Marinka near Novomyhailivka (36km southwest of Avdiivka).⁵⁰ Another Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted a ground attack near Kamianske (5km northeast of Avdiivka), where Ukrainian forces reportedly still control the H-20 highway.⁵¹ The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces continued routine indirect fire along the line of contact in Donetsk and eastern Zaporizhia oblasts.⁵²

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of January 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Major Railroads
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

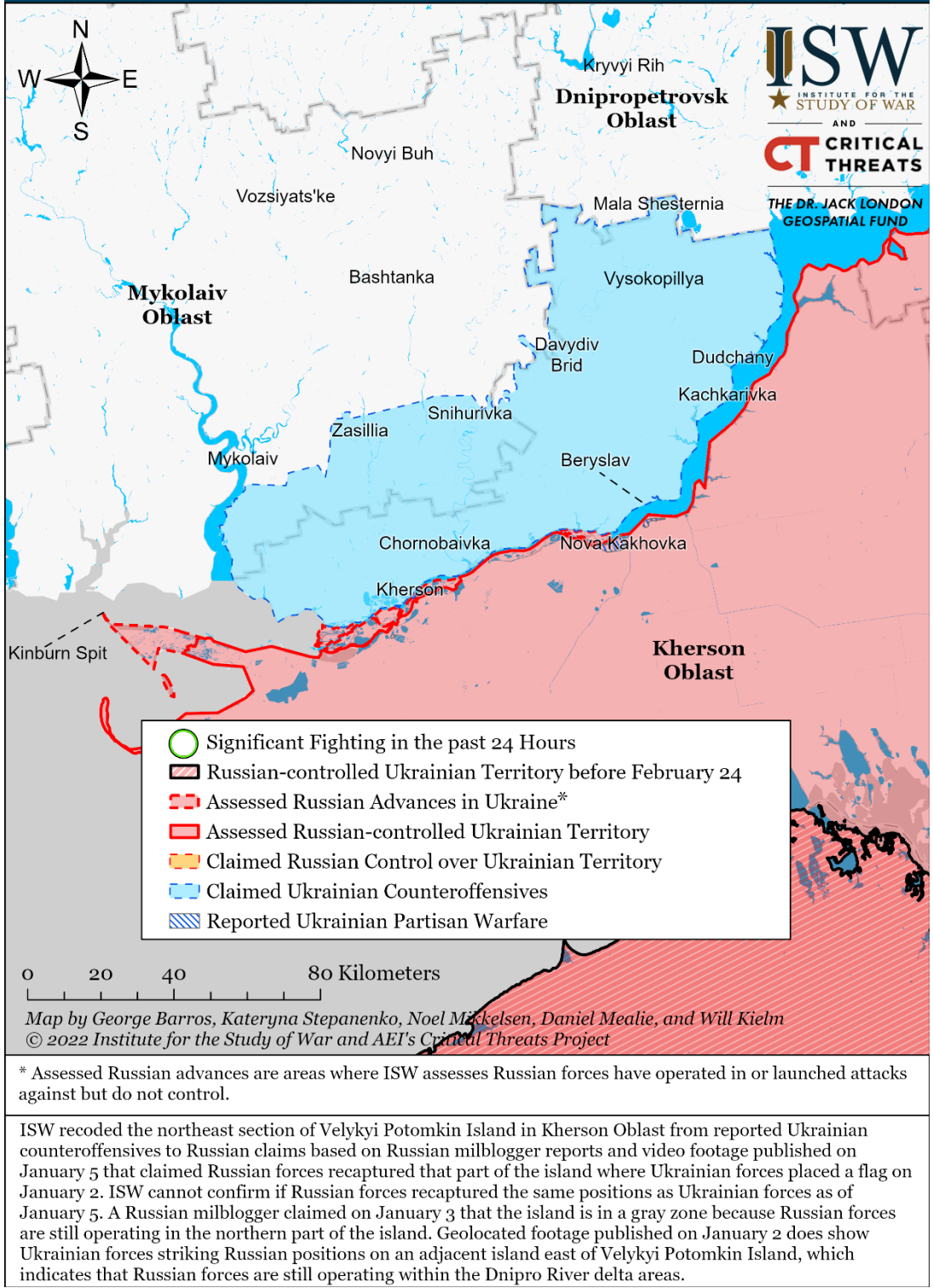
Supporting Effort—Southern Axis (Russian objective: Maintain frontline positions and secure rear areas against Ukrainian strikes)

Ukrainian officials have indicated that Russian forces are concentrating in Zaporizhia Oblast, possibly for a large defensive or offensive effort. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on January 18 that Russian forces conducted unspecified offensive actions near Hulyaipole and Orkhiv, an inflection from the General Staff's normal reporting of the Zaporizhia Oblast front.⁵³ Ukrainian Zaporizhia Oblast Military Administration Head Oleksandr Starukh stated recently that Russian forces are concentrating in Zaporizhia Oblast and later intensified shelling in Zaporizhia Oblast, as ISW has previously reported.⁵⁴ Other Ukrainian officials have recently reported that Russian forces are transporting large convoys of military personnel, equipment, and defensive fortifications along critical logistics lines throughout Zaporizhia Oblast.⁵⁵ Ukrainian Kherson Oblast Military Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated that Russian forces train mobilized personnel on the Arabat Spit in Crimea and then transport them to unspecified areas east, which could include Zaporizhia Oblast.⁵⁶ It is currently unclear which effort Russian forces aim to support by concentrating in Zaporizhia Oblast. However, Zaporizhia Oblast occupation head Yevgeny Balitsky claimed on January 13 that new pro-Russian volunteers from Serbia arrived in Zaporizhia Oblast to "defend the front lines," suggesting that Russian forces may be preparing for a defensive effort.⁵⁷ Russian milbloggers and minor occupation officials, including Zaporizhia Oblast occupation official Vladimir Rogov, have claimed for months that Ukrainian forces are preparing for an offensive in Zaporizhia Oblast.⁵⁸ Rogov claimed on January 18 that Ukrainian forces in the Zaporizhia direction began preparing for a defensive rather than offensive effort, suggesting that Rogov may aim to prepare the information space for a battle in the Zaporizhia direction without inciting panic over a possible future Ukrainian counteroffensive.⁵⁹

Russian forces' increasing use of incendiary munitions to conduct what appear to be otherwise routine strikes in southern Ukraine supports ISW's recent assessment that Russian forces likely face a shortage of conventional artillery rounds.⁶⁰ Footage shows that Russian forces used incendiary munitions to strike Kherson City overnight on January 17-18, the second observed instance of Russian forces using incendiary munitions in Kherson City within 24 hours and the third observed instance of Russian forces using incendiary munitions in Ukraine within the past two weeks.⁶¹ Ukrainian Zaporizhia Oblast Administration Head Oleksandr Starukh stated that Russian forces fired incendiary munitions at an unspecified area along the Zaporizhia Oblast front line on January 18.⁶² Ukrainian strikes against Russian military assets along critical ground lines of communication (GLOCs) in southern Ukraine likely exacerbated an existing shortage.

Russian forces continued defensive operations in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on January 18. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian Southern Military District tank elements in Kherson Oblast fired at unspecified targets on the east (left) bank of the Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast and prevented Ukrainian forces from landing on the east bank of the Dnipro River.⁶³ This report suggests that Ukrainian forces occasionally reach east bank Kherson Oblast, assuming that the milblogger meant to say east (left) bank Kherson Oblast, (which Russian forces control), rather than the Ukrainian-controlled west (right) bank. Russian forces continued routine fire against areas in west (right) bank Kherson Oblast on January 18, including Kherson City and its environs.⁶⁴ Ukrainian forces reportedly struck Russian force concentrations in Ahaimany on January 12-16 and Velyka Lepetikha on January 18.⁶⁵

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of January 18, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Ukrainian and Russian sources continued to indicate that Russian authorities are likely preparing for a second wave of mobilization. Pskov Oblast Deputy Artur Gaiduk claimed on January 16 that the Kremlin responded to his inquiry on the status of mobilization, stating that the call-up of mobilized persons has ended but that Putin's initial partial mobilization decree remains active.⁶⁶ The Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on January 18 that military recruitment centers are increasing recruitment efforts among older men and migrants from former Soviet republics.⁶⁷ The Ukrainian Resistance Center that Russian military recruiters in North Ossetia are mobilizing people who struggle with drug addiction.⁶⁸ Russian lawmakers submitted a bill to the Russian State Duma on January 16 to defer mobilization for farmers, entrepreneurs, and other small business owners.⁶⁹

Russian authorities continue to struggle with and crack down on insubordination and desertion within Russian forces. A Russian source reported on January 18 that Russian authorities conducted a manhunt for a Russian military servicemember who escaped from his unit and traveled through Voronezh to Lipetsk Oblast.⁷⁰ The source claimed that the soldier opened fire on police and died in the shootout.⁷¹ Russian authorities charged eight mobilized personnel from Kaliningrad Oblast with desertion after the personnel traveled from Luhansk Oblast to Podolsk, Russia, via taxi and bus with their weapons.⁷² An Omsk Oblast military court sentenced one mobilized servicemember to six years in a strict regime penal colony for assaulting and threatening to kill his commander.⁷³ A Russian source claimed that police in Lipetsk Oblast had to intervene with 200 military personnel who rioted due to the lack of heat on the train transporting them to the front lines.⁷⁴ *Radio Free Kavkaz* reported on January 15 that Dagestani contract personnel of the 136th Guards Separate Motorized Rifle Brigade of the 58th Combined Arms Army of the Southern Military District refused to fight in Ukraine or follow their commander's orders, and left Ukraine for their permanent base in Buynaksk, Dagestan.⁷⁵

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)

Russian occupation authorities are intensifying efforts to consolidate economic control of occupied territories. Russian-appointed Governor of Sevastopol Mikhail Razvozhaev announced on January 18 that Russian state-owned Sberbank began operations in Russian-controlled Crimea and claimed that a large number of Sberbank ATMs will activate within one year.⁷⁶ A Russian milblogger complained about Sberbank's inability to open ATMs in Crimea any sooner and suggested that it will take eight years for Sberbank to operate in occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts.⁷⁷ The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported on January 18 that Russian occupation authorities have levied a 15-20% fee when Ukrainian citizens withdraw the hryvnia (Ukraine's national currency) and have artificially inflated prices of the hryvnia in occupied territories to promote a societal transition to the Russian ruble.⁷⁸ The Ukrainian Resistance Center also reported on January 18 that Russian occupation authorities are raiding small businesses and forcing Ukrainian enterprises to accept the ruble.⁷⁹ Russian forces and occupation authorities continued intensifying law enforcement measures to identify pro-Ukrainian civilians and partisans in occupied territories on January 18. A Kherson Oblast Telegram channel reported on January 18 that Russian forces and occupation authorities are searching for partisans under the guise

of anti-terrorist operations in occupied Hola Prystan, Kherson Oblast.⁸⁰ The Telegram channel amplified reports that Russian occupation forces and authorities plan to search Hola Prystan residents' cell phones and advised locals to purge their data.⁸¹ A Russian source reported on January 18 that Russian forces detained four people in an unspecified area in Kherson Oblast under charges of being a Ukrainian Security Service (SBU) sabotage group.⁸² Ukrainian Mayor of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov stated on January 18 that Russian state media is boasting about reported Russian successes at identifying and expelling alleged Ukrainian partisans from occupied territories.⁸³ A Russian source claimed on January 18 that Russian officials are transferring counterintelligence officers from Russia to occupied territories as occupation authorities continue to face persistent challenges in maintaining adequate counterintelligence operations in occupied territories.⁸⁴

Russian occupation authorities are continuing efforts to consolidate administrative control of occupied territories. Kherson Oblast Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated on January 18 that Russian occupation authorities gave residents in occupied Ivanivka Hromada, Kherson Oblast, a three-day deadline to submit documentation to reregister houses and land under Russian law.⁸⁵ Russian media outlet "MVD Media" stated on January 18 that the Russian State Traffic Directorate has opened 21 registration and examination divisions in occupied territories and has facilitated over 55,000 public administration transactions in occupied territories since December 14.⁸⁶ MVD Media stated that the State Traffic Directorate will no longer require that drivers pass an exam in order to receive Russian driver's licenses, noting that the special procedure for providing public services in occupied territories is valid until January 1, 2026.⁸⁷

Russian occupation authorities are continuing to restrict civilian movement from Russian-occupied Ukraine. Kherson Oblast Administration Advisor Serhiy Khlan stated on January 18 that Russian occupation authorities have not yet honored previous promises to reopen the Vasylivka checkpoint, previously the only exit from occupied Kherson Oblast, on January 15.⁸⁸ Khlan also reported that Russian forces are continuing to incessantly shell Kakhovka, Kherson Oblast, and evacuating residents to Russia.⁸⁹ Ukrainian Mayor of Melitopol Ivan Fedorov stated on January 18 that Russian occupation authorities in Zaporizhia Oblast are deporting Ukrainian residents without warning, forcing them out of their homes with little to no belongings.⁹⁰

Russian occupation authorities continue to face bureaucratic issues in maintaining a sufficient pro-Russia workforce in occupied territories. The Ukrainian General Staff reported on January 18 that Russian officials are importing civilians from Russia and Russian-occupied Crimea to perform administrative tasks as occupation authorities continue to face resistance from Ukrainian workers and struggle to recruit collaborators in occupied territories.⁹¹

ISW will continue to report 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 the assessment changes.

Observed indicators for the MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- Nothing significant to report.

Observed ambiguous indicators for MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- A local Russian media outlet in the Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug reported on January 17 that mobilized soldiers from Khanty-Mansiysk Autonomous Okrug deployed to Belarus for training.⁹²
- The Belarusian Ministry of Defense reported that Russian and Belarusian pilots continued conducting joint combat training tasks as part of the joint Russian-Belarusian Regional Grouping of Forces (RGV) on January 18.⁹³ The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced that Commander of the Belarusian Air Force and Air Defense Forces Colonel Andrey Lukyanovich is presiding over these exercises.⁹⁴
- Belarusian mechanized elements continue conducting exercises in Belarus. The Belarusian Ministry of Defense announced that elements of the Belarusian 6th Separate Guards Mechanized Brigade conducted unspecified tasks in an unspecified location as part of a combat readiness check on January 18.⁹⁵

Observed counter-indicators for the MDCOA in the past 24 hours:

- The Ukrainian General Staff reiterated that it has not observed Russian forces in Belarus forming a strike group as of January 18 and reported that Russian and Belarusian forces are conducting exercises on interactions between airforce and ground force elements during offensive operations.⁹⁶

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 kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70367

² <https://isw.pub/UkrWar011723>

³ <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-31>

⁴ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar121422>

⁵ <https://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/ISW%20Ukraine%20Indicators%20Update.pdf>

⁶ <https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-15-2023>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-likens-us-actions-those-hitler-napoleon-2023-01-18/>

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-lavrov-likens-us-actions-those-hitler-napoleon-2023-01-18/>

⁹ <https://isw.pub/UkrWar120622> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar112222> ; <https://isw.pub/UkrWar110722>;

<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-october-10>;

<https://understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-june-29;>
<https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-19>

¹⁰ [kremlin dot ru/events/president/news/70367](http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70367)

¹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-zelenskiy-peace-plan-absurd-no-serious-proposal-table-2023-01-18/> ;
[https://tass dot com/politics/1564139](https://tass.com/politics/1564139)

¹² [https://tass dot com/politics/1564139](https://tass.com/politics/1564139)

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