

# Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 15, 2023

Christina Harward, Angelica Evans, Riley Bailey, and Frederick W. Kagan  
December 15, 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 2:00 pm ET on December 15. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 16 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.**

German outlet *BILD* stated on December 14 that unspecified intelligence findings and sources indicate that Russia plans to occupy Ukrainian territory beyond the four (illegally) annexed Ukrainian oblasts throughout 2024-2026. *BILD* stated that Russia plans to capture the entirety of Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and up to the Oskil River in Kharkiv Oblast by the end of 2024.[1] These reported goals are in line with ongoing localized Russian offensive operations in Donetsk, Luhansk, and Kharkiv oblasts. Russia also reportedly plans to take large parts of Zaporizhia, Dnipropetrovsk, and Kharkiv oblasts, including Kharkiv City if possible, in 2025 and 2026. *BILD* reported that an insider source stated that Russia plans to occupy large parts of eastern Ukraine located east of the Dnipro River within the next 36 months. Russia is reportedly planning to hold the current front line in Kherson Oblast along the Dnipro River and is only concerned about preventing Ukrainian forces in southern Ukraine from advancing towards occupied Crimea. *BILD* stated that Russia's plans are based on mobilizing Russia's defense industrial base (DIB), suffering annual casualties of around 100,000 military personnel in attritional offensive operations, and benefiting from the possible election of a US president in 2024 who dramatically reduces or stops military support to Ukraine. *BILD* reported that a source familiar with the intelligence findings stated that the Kremlin plans to rely on "sham negotiations" while continuing to conduct offensive operations similar to the way in which Russia negotiated the Second Minsk agreement in 2015 while the Russian military continued to occupy additional Ukrainian settlements. *BILD* previously published largely accurate intelligence findings about Russia's plans for its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in December 2021 which assessed that Russia would attack Ukraine from the south from Crimea, from Russian-controlled territory in eastern Ukraine, and from the north in late January or early February 2022, although the Russian invasion as executed did not perfectly align with *BILD*'s reporting.[2]

ISW cannot independently authenticate *BILD*'s reporting, but Russia's reported plans for the war in Ukraine through 2026 are in line with continued Russian preparations for a prolonged war effort. The Russian military command is pursuing long-term restructuring and expansion efforts to form strategic reserves, and Russia has been gradually mobilizing its DIB to sustain a long war.[3] Russia's reported medium to long-term plans to occupy territory beyond the four (illegally) annexed territories are also

plausible considering that Russian officials, including Russian President Vladimir Putin, have reverted to expansionist rhetoric recently, and Russian forces continue offensive operations to expand their positions in Kharkiv Oblast. Russian officials have issued statements about Russia's intention to occupy and annex additional Ukrainian territory beyond the current front lines and the four (illegally) annexed territories.[4] ISW recently assessed that the sudden collapse of Western aid would likely lead sooner or later to the collapse of Ukraine's ability to hold off the Russian military, and Russian forces could ultimately push all the way to the western Ukrainian border in such a scenario.[5]

Ukrainian Main Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Lieutenant General Kyrylo Budanov stated in an interview published on December 14 that Russia currently has no intention of changing its plans for the war in Ukraine in 2025, however.[6] Budanov stated that Russia may develop a new plan if nothing changes on the front line by the end of 2024.

**Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threateningly urged Ukraine to negotiate with Russia sooner rather than later in framing consistent with the ISW assessment that Russia intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine through military means.** Lavrov said at a December 15 meeting of the collegiums of the Russian and Belarusian Foreign Ministries that the longer the war in Ukraine continues, the more difficult negotiating conditions will be for Ukraine.[7] Lavrov's statement suggests that the Kremlin believes that the longer the war continues, the more territory Russia will be able to occupy and the course of the war will increasingly put Ukraine in a weaker negotiating position. Russian President Vladimir Putin reiterated on December 14 that Russia's maximalist objectives in Ukraine - which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender - are unchanged.[8] ISW continues to assess that Russia does not intend to engage in serious negotiations with Ukraine in good faith.[9] The Kremlin has repeatedly pushed information operations feigning interest in negotiations with Ukraine, and Lavrov's statement is likely also an attempt to set conditions for Russia to move away from this information operation.[10]

**Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba published an op-ed entitled "There is a Path to Victory in Ukraine" on December 15, wherein he argues that Ukrainian military objectives remain feasible despite increasingly pessimistic discussions in the West.** Kuleba stated in the op-ed published in *Foreign Affairs* that Ukrainian objectives are still attainable as long as three factors remain in place: an adequate level of Western military aid; the rapid development of industrial capacity in the US, Europe, and Ukraine; and a principled and realistic approach to the prospects of negotiations with Russia.[11] Kuleba acknowledged that the Ukrainian 2023 counteroffensive did not achieve the "lightning fast" liberation of Ukrainian territory but said that observers would be mistaken to make judgments about the entire course of the war based on one stage of fighting.[12] Kuleba pointed to Russian gains in eastern Ukraine in summer 2022 and the following successful Ukrainian counteroffensives in Kharkiv and Kherson oblasts as an example of how one stage of fighting does not indicate how subsequent stages of fighting may develop.[13] Kuleba added that a negotiated ceasefire would allow Russia to reinforce positions, making it difficult for Ukrainian forces to liberate territory in the future while also giving Russia respite to launch a more intense offensive campaign in the following years.[14] ISW has routinely assessed that the Kremlin would leverage any pause or ceasefire to prepare for renewed aggression against Ukraine.[15]

**Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 14 to 15.** Ukrainian sources reported that Ukrainian air defenses downed 14 Shahed-131/136 drones, an S-300 missile, and a Kh-59 missile.[16] The Ukrainian Air Force reported

that Russian forces launched three Kinzhal missiles in the direction of Kyiv City, Kyiv Oblast and Starokostyantyniv, Khmelnytskyi Oblast on December 14 and that Ukrainian forces destroyed one Kinzhal over Kyiv Oblast.[17] Russian sources claimed that Russian forces struck targets in Mykolaiv, Dnipropetrovsk, Khmelnytskyi, Kharkiv, Poltava, Kyiv, and Odesa oblasts on the night of December 14 to 15.[18]

**Finnish authorities closed Finland’s border checkpoints with Russia again on December 15 amid continued Russian hybrid warfare efforts to orchestrate an artificial migrant crisis.** The Finnish Ministry of the Interior announced on December 12 that Finland would reopen two border checkpoints with Russia on December 14 and warned that Finland would close the border again if Russia continued its "hybrid operation." [19] The Finnish Ministry of the Interior announced on December 14 that Finland would close the two checkpoints on December 15 after a reported 36 asylum seekers arrived on the Finnish-Russian border several hours after the checkpoints reopened.[20] *Reuters* reported that Finland typically received less than one asylum seeker per day prior to Russian efforts to artificially inflate the number of migrants seeking asylum in Finland.[21] Finnish Minister of the Interior Mari Rantanen stated that this is a sign that Russian authorities are continuing their hybrid operation against Finland.[22] Finland’s border checkpoints with Russia will remain closed until January 14, 2024.[23]

**Germany announced new military and humanitarian aid packages to Ukraine on December 14.** The German military aid package includes a Patriot air defense system and missiles, 40mm and 155mm ammunition, mine clearing systems, and drone detection systems.[24] The German government also announced an aid package valued at 6.1 million euros of winter humanitarian assistance for Ukraine, including generators, heaters, and tents.[25]

### **Key Takeaways:**

- **German outlet *BILD* stated on December 14 that unspecified intelligence findings and sources indicate that Russia plans to occupy Ukrainian territory beyond the four (illegally) annexed Ukrainian oblasts throughout 2024-2026.**
- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov threateningly urged Ukraine to negotiate with Russia sooner rather than later in framing consistent with the ISW assessment that Russia intends to achieve its maximalist objectives in Ukraine through military means.**
- **Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba published an op-ed entitled “There is a Path to Victory in Ukraine” on December 15, wherein he argues that Ukrainian military objectives remain feasible despite increasingly pessimistic discussions in the West.**
- **Russian forces conducted a series of missile and drone strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 14 to 15.**
- **Finnish authorities closed Finland’s border checkpoints with Russia again on December 15 amid continued Russian hybrid warfare efforts to orchestrate an artificial migrant crisis.**
- **Germany announced new military and humanitarian aid packages to Ukraine on December 14.**
- **Russian forces continued offensive operations near Kupyansk, northeast and near Bakhmut, near Avdiivka, west and southwest of Donetsk City, in the**

**Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area, and in western Zaporizhia Oblast and made confirmed advances in several areas.**

- **Kremlin newswire TASS reported on December 14 that “Grom” special units (elite anti-drug special units of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs [MVD]) will fully transition to being subordinated to Rosgvardia in early 2024.**
- **Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted Russia’s intention to build high-speed railways in occupied Ukraine, likely hours after Ukrainian partisans damaged a key railway line in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.**

# Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



***We do not report in detail on Russian war crimes because these activities are well-covered in Western media and do not directly affect the military operations we are assessing and forecasting. We will continue to evaluate and report on the effects of these criminal activities on the Ukrainian military and the Ukrainian population and specifically on combat in Ukrainian urban areas. We utterly condemn Russian violations of the laws of armed conflict and the Geneva Conventions and crimes against humanity even though we do not describe them in these reports.***

- Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine (comprised of two subordinate main efforts)
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #1 – Capture the remainder of Luhansk Oblast and push westward into eastern Kharkiv Oblast and encircle northern Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Subordinate Main Effort #2 – Capture the entirety of Donetsk Oblast
- Russian Supporting Effort – Southern Axis
- Russian Mobilization and Force Generation Efforts
- Russian Technological Adaptations
- Activities in Russian-occupied areas
- Russian Information Operations and Narratives

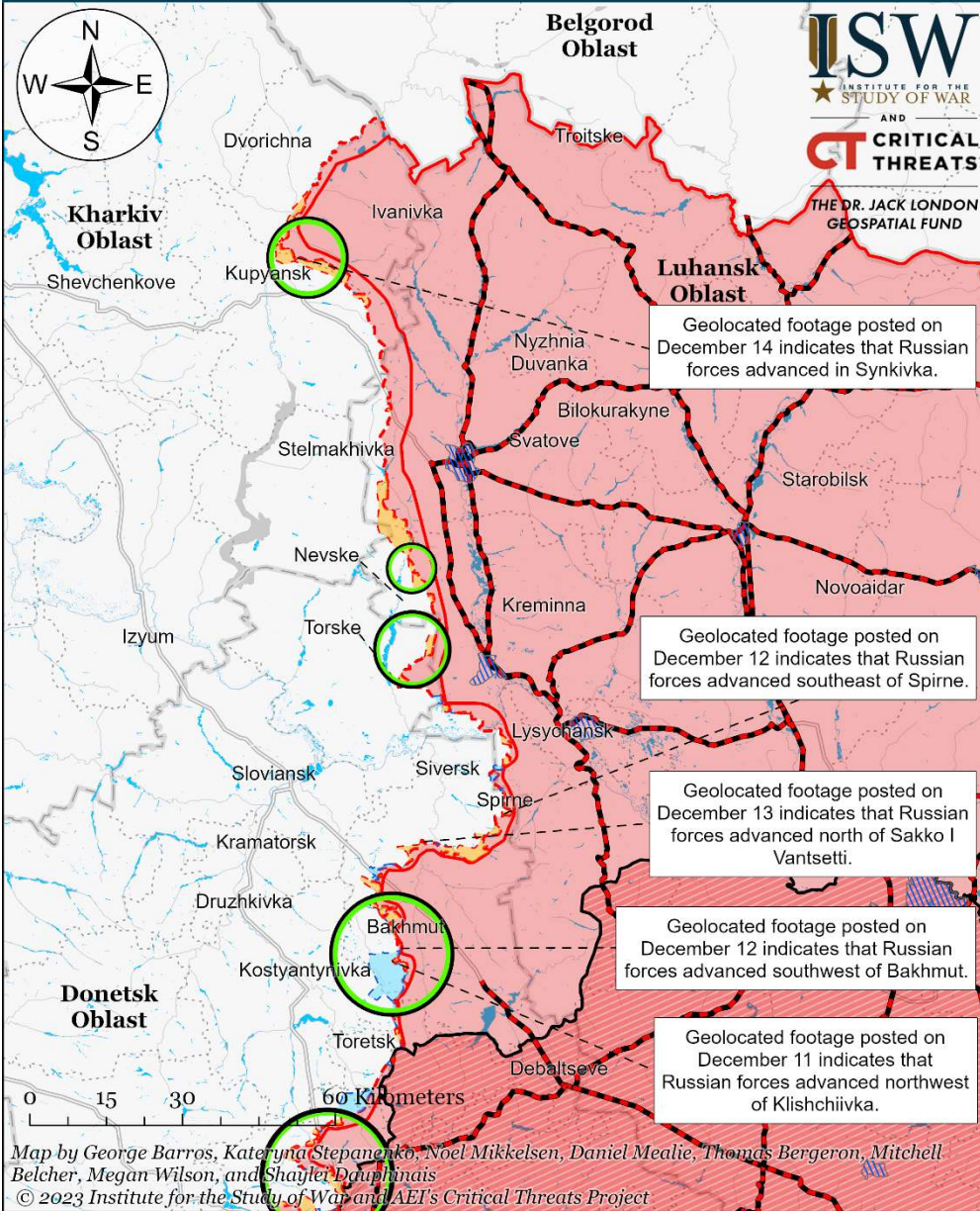
### **Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine**

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

Russian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk on December 15 and recently made a confirmed advance. Geolocated footage published on December 14 indicates that Russian forces advanced in northern Synkivka (8km northeast of Kupyansk).[26] A Russian milblogger claimed on December 15 that Russian forces occupied new positions near Synkivka.[27] Ukrainian military observer Kostyantyn Mashovets stated that elements of the Russian 25th Motorized Rifle Brigade (6th Combined Arms Army [CAA], Western Military District [WMD]), with support from elements of the 138th Motorized Rifle Brigade (6th CAA, WMD) and 15th Motorized Rifle Regiment (2nd Motorized Rifle Division, 1st Guards Tank Army, WMD), pushed Ukrainian forces out of positions north of Synkivka and unsuccessfully attacked east of the settlement.[28] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Synkivka.[29] A Kremlin milblogger and Ukrainian journalist Yuriy Butusov stated that Russian forces conducted an unsuccessful mechanized assault near Synkivka.[30] A Russian milblogger claimed that fighting is ongoing in forest areas near Ivanivka (20km southeast of Kupyansk).[31]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces conducted offensive operations near Kupyansk but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances on December 15. Russian sources, including the Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD), claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Synkivka.[32] The Russian MoD claimed that Russian forces repelled 27 Ukrainian attacks in the Kupyansk direction in the past week.[33]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of December 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours
- 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.

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

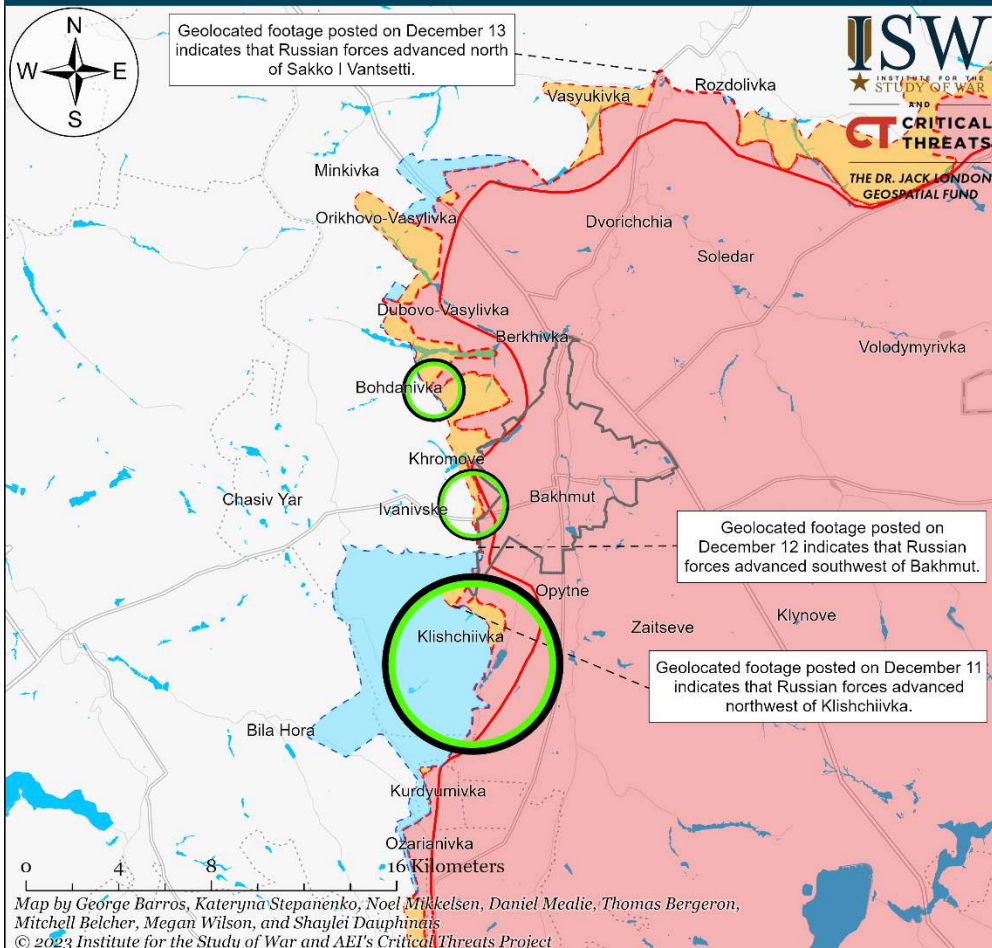
Russian forces reportedly continued ground attacks northeast of Bakhmut on December 15 but did not make any confirmed gains. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces have the initiative north of Soledar (11km northeast of Bakhmut) and pushed Ukrainian forces out of unspecified positions near Rozdolivka.[34]

Russian forces continued localized offensive operations near Bakhmut on December 15 and recently made confirmed gains. Geolocated footage published on December 11 indicates that Russian forces recently advanced northwest of Klishchiivka (7km southwest of Bakhmut).[35] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced towards Orikhovo-Vasylivka (14km northwest of Bakhmut) and Hryhorivka (11km northwest of Bakhmut) and established a foothold within Bohdanivka (6km northwest of Bakhmut) on December 14 and 15.[36] ISW has not seen visual confirmation of these claims. Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces also advanced northwest of Klishchiivka, captured tactical heights in the direction of Ivanivske (6km west of Bakhmut), and pushed Ukrainian forces out of positions in Andriivka (10km southwest of Bakhmut).[37] A Russian milblogger amplified footage on December 14 purporting to show Russian forces operating in the waste heap west of Horlivka (25km southwest of Bakhmut).[38] Russian Southern Grouping of Forces Spokesperson Vadim Astafyev claimed that Russian forces repelled six Ukrainian assaults near Klishchiivka and Pivnichne (21km southwest of Bakhmut).[39]

Russian sources are increasingly characterizing the localized Russian offensive effort around Bakhmut as an operation to encircle Chasiv Yar (12km west of Bakhmut). Russian milbloggers characterized Russian attacks west of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka and Khromove and south of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Andriivka as an organized push towards Chasiv Yar.[40] Russian milbloggers noted that it will be difficult to encircle Chasiv Yar due to major Ukrainian fortifications and the settlement’s location on a tactical height.[41] ISW assesses that Russian forces are at least nine kilometers away from Chasiv Yar. Russian sources are likely aware that an operation to encircle Chasiv Yar would take a considerable amount of time, even under the best conditions, given some Russian sources’ willingness to celebrate even the smallest Russian advances in efforts to capture Avdiivka and Marinka.[42]



# Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of December 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



- Bakhmut City Limits
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine\*
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

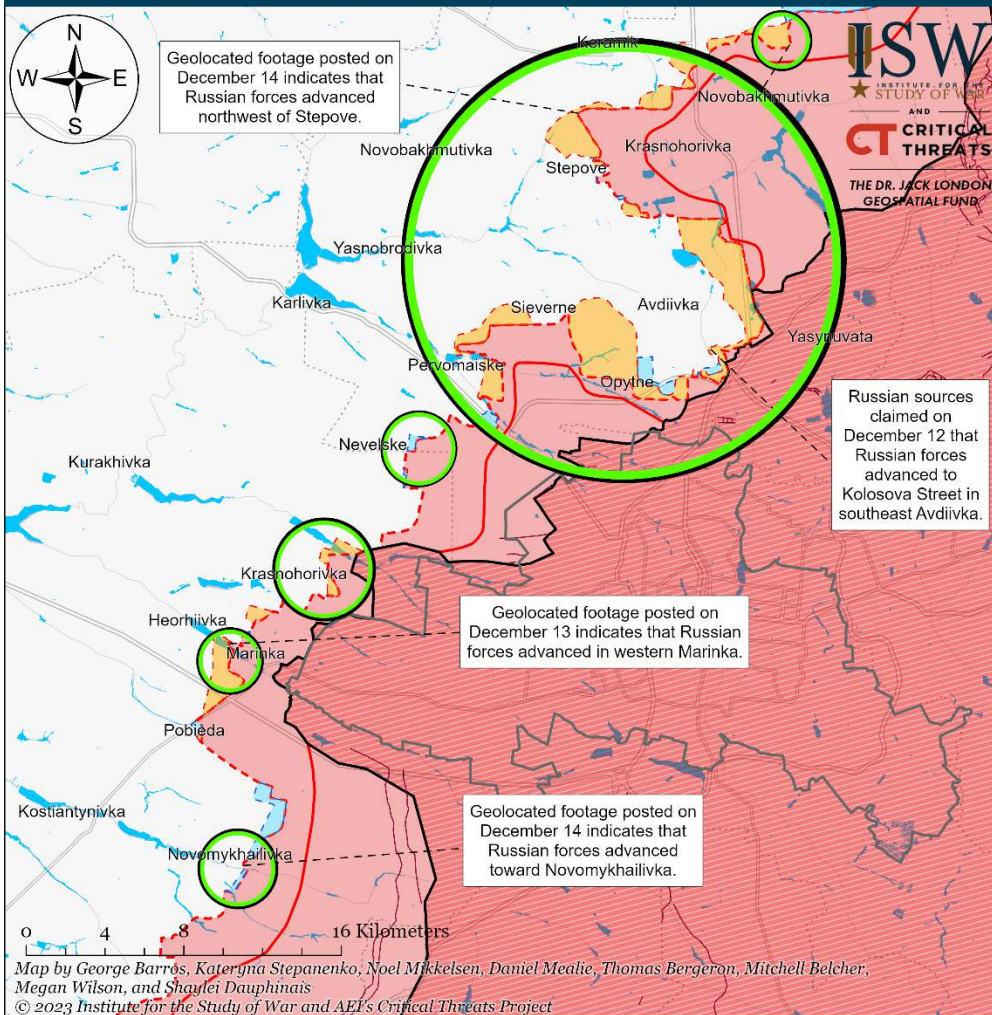
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 14 that Russian forces advanced 280 meters along a forested area east of Bohdaniivka. A Russian source claimed on December 13 that Russian forces advanced along a front up to two kilometers wide and at a depth of 700 meters in the Ivanivske direction. A Russian source claimed on December 11 that unspecified Ukrainian analysts claimed that Russian forces advanced in an area 2.91 kilometers wide and 840 meters in depth towards Bohdaniivka and Khromove.

Russian forces continued offensive operations near Avdiivka on December 15 and recently advanced. Geolocated footage published on December 15 indicates that Russian forces advanced near Stepove (3km north of Avdiivka) and Pervomaiske (11km southwest of Avdiivka).[43] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced near the railway line north of Stepove and recently captured positions in a forest area north of Stepove, in the settlement, and southwest of the settlement.[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are also advancing "along a wide front" near Novokalynove (13km northeast of Avdiivka) and Berdychi (5km northwest of Avdiivka) and advanced

up to two kilometers in depth north of Avdiivka.[45] A Russian news aggregator claimed that Russian forces advanced near Ocheretyne (15km northwest of Avdiivka) and the Avdiivka industrial zone (just southwest of the settlement) on December 14.[46] The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 15 that Ukrainian forces repelled at least 45 Russian attacks east of Novobakhmutivka (13km northwest of Avdiivka), Stepove, and Avdiivka and south of Sieverne (6km west of Avdiivka), Pervomaiske, and Nevelske (13km southwest of Avdiivka).[47] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Commander Brigadier General Oleksandr Tarnavskiy stated that Russian forces are attacking with assault groups of up to 20 servicemen with armored vehicle support in the Tavriisk direction (Avdiivka through western Zaporizhia Oblast).[48]

# Assessed Control of Terrain near Donetsk City as of December 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



|   |  |                                     |
|---|--|-------------------------------------|
| Donetsk City Limits                             | Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*            | Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives |
| Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory | Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory | Russian Field Fortifications        |

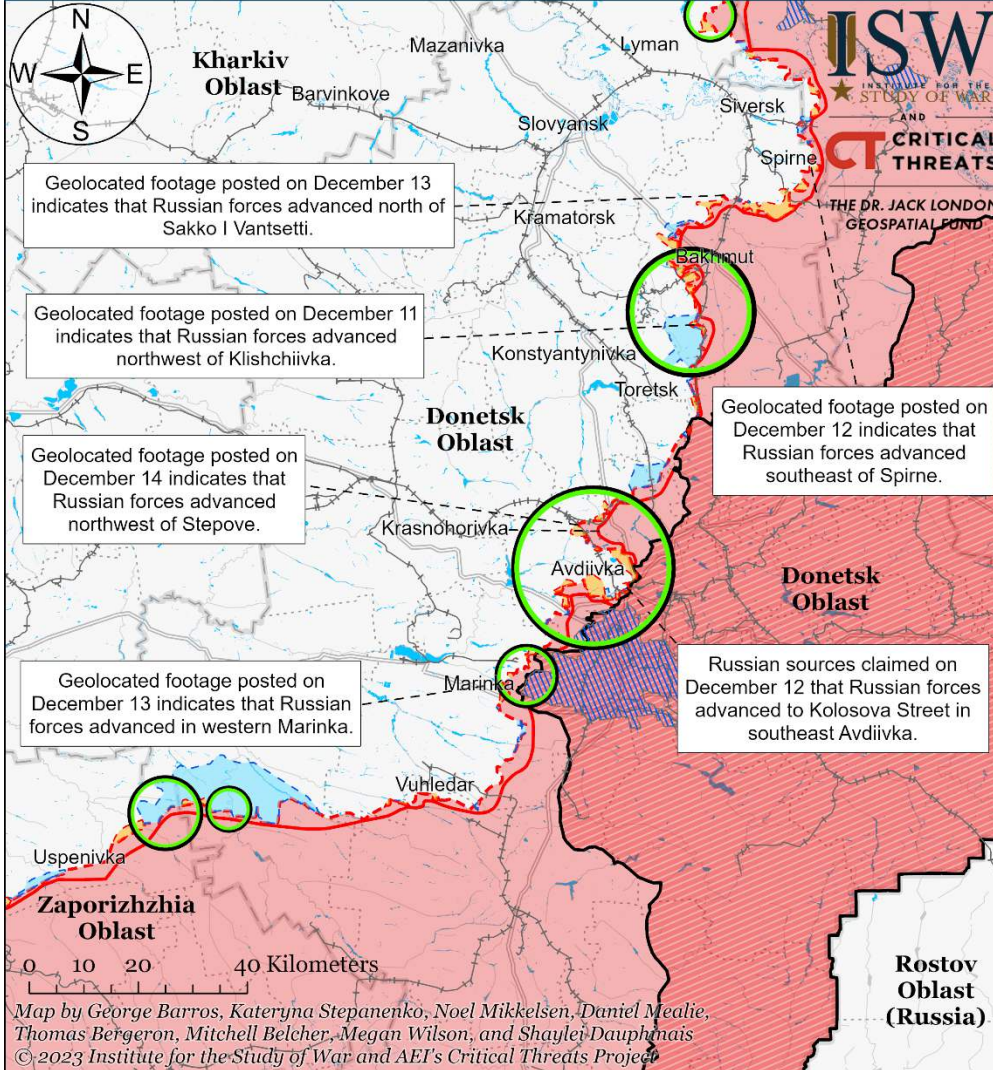
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 15 that Russian forces advanced along a 920-meter wide front north of Stepove. A Russian source claimed on December 15 that Russian forces advanced 450 meters along a 850-meter wide salient in northern Marinka. A Ukrainian source claimed on December 13 that Russian forces occupy 92% of Marinka. Russian sources claimed on December 13 that Russian forces advanced two kilometers south of Marinka towards Pobeida up to five kilometers wide.

Russian forces continued offensive operations west and southwest of Donetsk City on December 15 and recently made confirmed gains. Geolocated footage published on December 13 indicates that Russian forces advanced in western Marinka (just west of Donetsk City).[49] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced up to 450 meters in depth in northern Marinka.[50] Russian milbloggers claimed that Russian forces have almost completely captured Marinka and that Ukrainian forces control less than two percent of the settlement.[51] A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that

Russian forces are attempting to set conditions to capture Pobieda (5km southwest of Donetsk City).[52] A Russian news aggregator claimed that Russian forces advanced in the direction of Novomykhailivka (10km southwest of Donetsk City) and Pobieda on December 14.[53] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled at least 17 Russian attacks near Krasnohorivka (directly west of Donetsk City), Marinka, and Novomykhailivka.[54]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of December 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

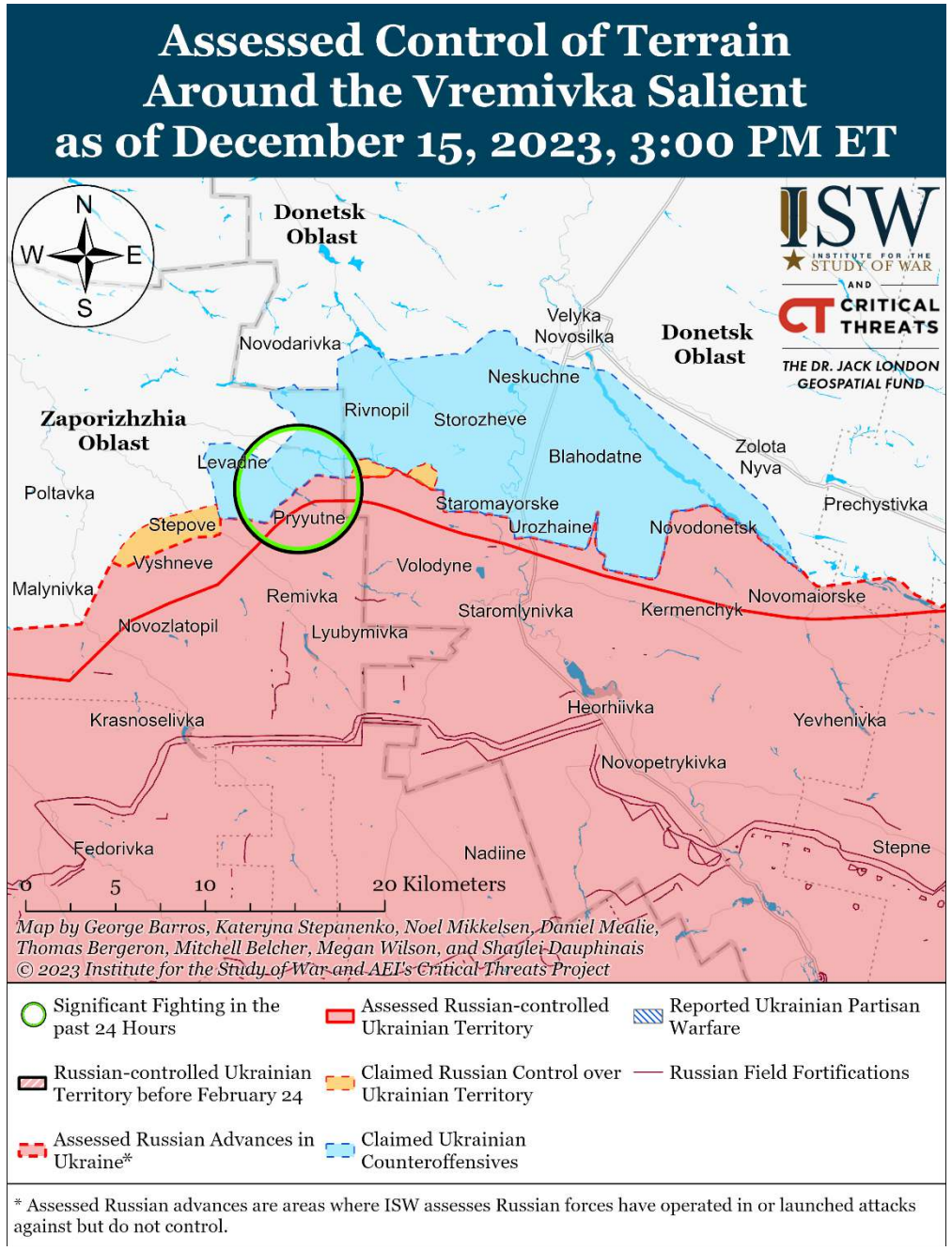
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 15 that Russian forces advanced 450 meters along a 850-meter wide salient in northern Marinka.

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

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Russian forces repelled two Ukrainian attacks in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area in the past week.[55]

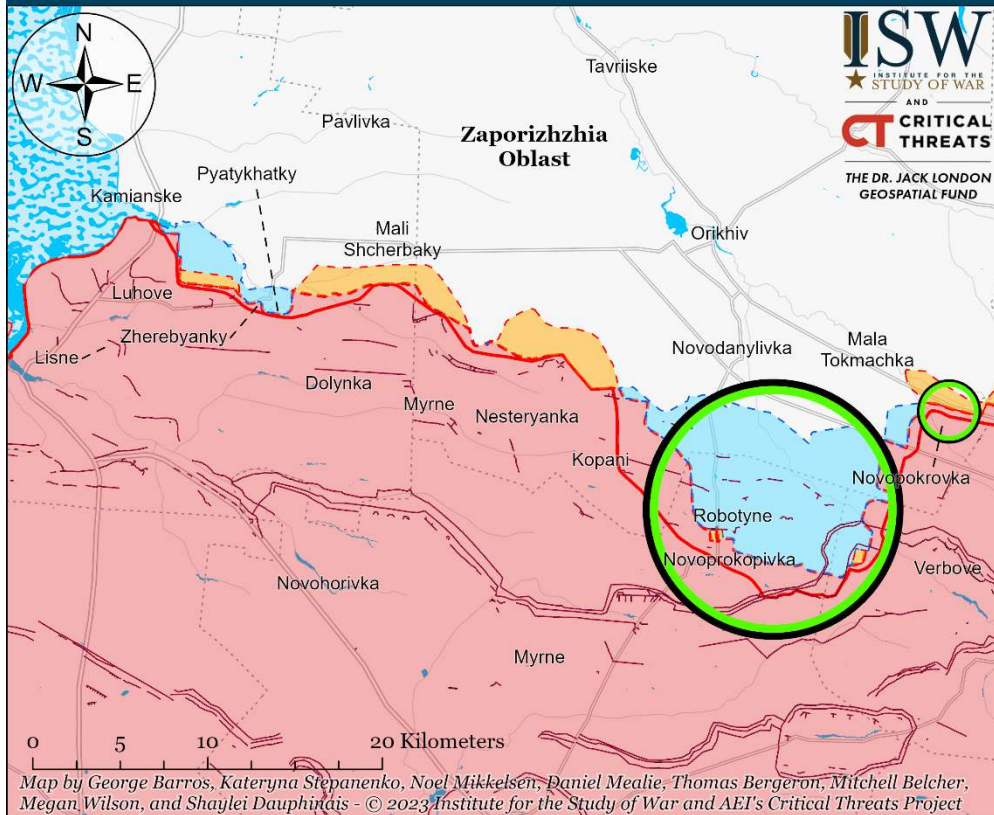
The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area north of Pryyutne (16km southwest of Velyka Novosilka) and near Staromayorske (9km south of Velyka Novosilka) on December 15.[56]



Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Ukrainian forces struck Mariupol, occupied Donetsk Oblast on December 14. Geolocated footage published on December 14 and 15 shows a large fire at two locations in Mariupol, including the “Port City” shopping center.[57] Ukrainian Mariupol Mayoral Advisor Petro Andryushenko stated that the second Ukrainian strike hit the “Port City” shopping center where Russian forces stored military equipment, including air defense system components.[58] A Kremlin-affiliated milblogger claimed that the cause of the explosion at the shopping center was the detonation of an unidentified ammunition round in the parking lot.[59] The milblogger claimed that Russian forces store faulty ammunition in the shopping center.[60] Other Ukrainian and Russian sources stated that Ukrainian forces struck a concrete plant.[61]

Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces continued counteroffensive operations in western Zaporizhia Oblast but did not make any claimed or confirmed advances on December 15. Russian sources, including the Russian MoD, claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Robotyne and west of Verbove (9km east of Robotyne).[62]

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Pyatykhatky and Robotyne as of December 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

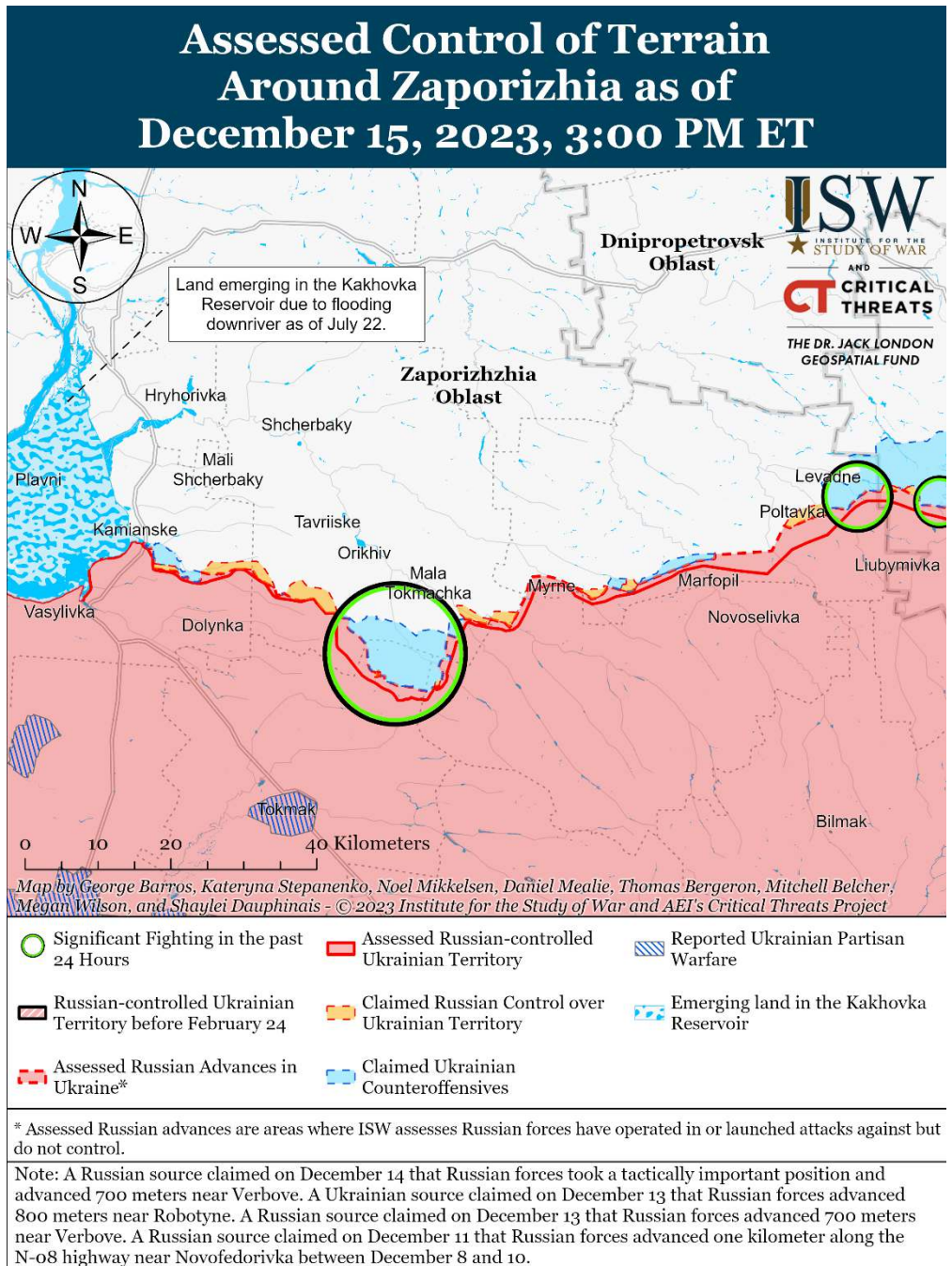
\* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 14 that Russian forces took a tactically important position and advanced 700 meters near Verbove. A Ukrainian source claimed on December 13 that Russian forces advanced 800 meters near Robotyne. A Russian source claimed on December 13 that Russian forces advanced 700 meters near Verbove. A Russian source claimed on December 11 that Russian forces advanced one kilometer along the N-08 highway near Novofedorivka between December 8 and 10.

Russian forces conducted offensive operations in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast but did not make any claimed or confirmed gains on December 15. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Russian forces unsuccessfully attacked south of Robotyne, northwest of Verbove, and west of Novopokrovka (13km northeast of Robotyne).[63] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces also unsuccessfully attacked from Novoprokopivka (2km south of Robotyne) and Novofedorivka (15km northeast of Robotyne).[64] A Russian source claimed that Russian forces are struggling with a lack of transport in the Zaporizhzhia direction and that Russian forces lack repair bases for vehicles in rear areas.[65] Russian



sources, including the Russian MoD, stated that elements of the Russian 7th Airborne (VDV) Division are operating near Verbove.[66]

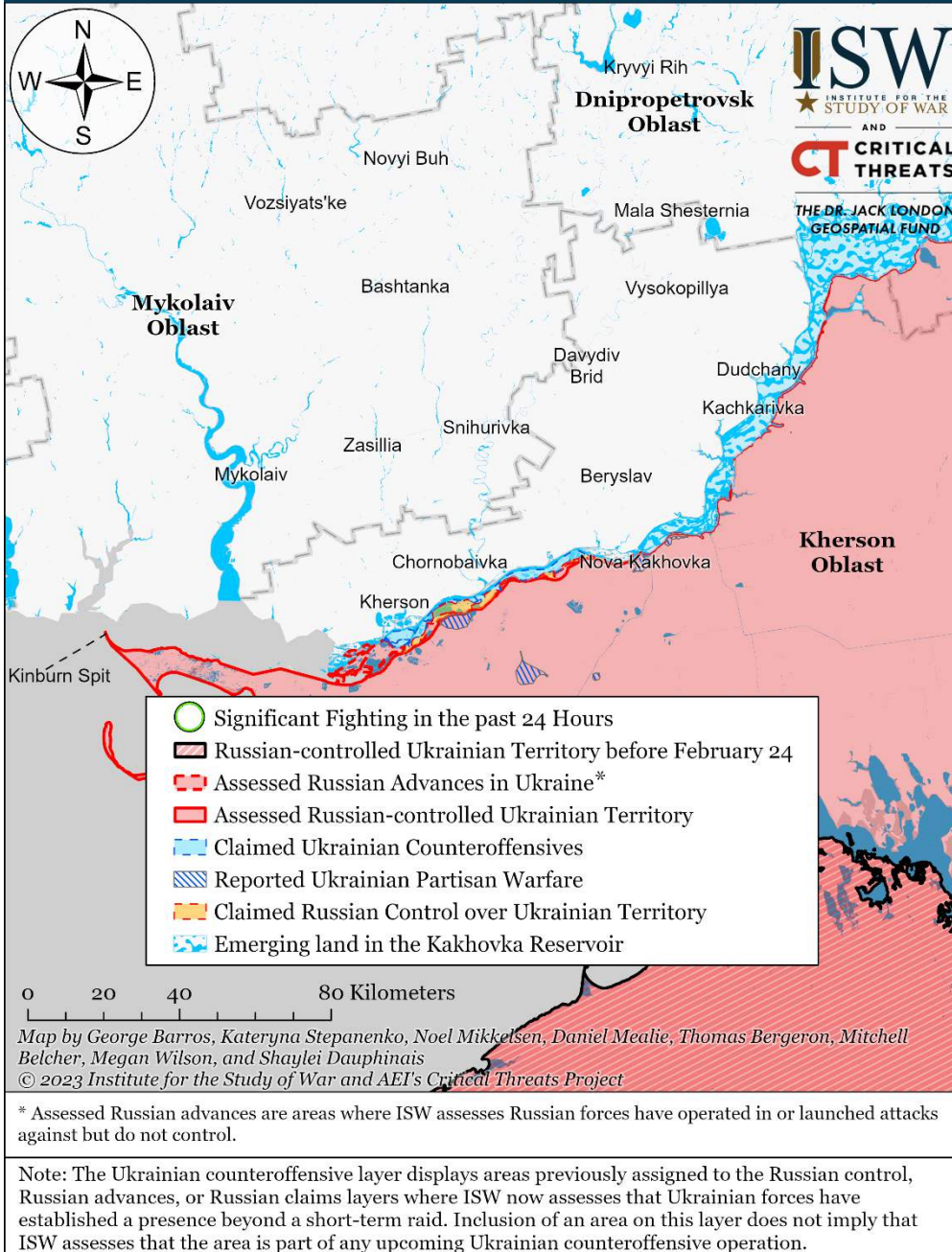


Ukrainian forces maintained positions in east (left) bank Kherson Oblast on December 15 after recent Russian ground activity in the area. The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces maintain positions on the east bank.[67] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces conducted a series of forays east of Krynky (30km northeast of Kherson Oblast and 2km from the Dnipro River) and that Ukrainian forces later retreated deeper into Krynky itself on December 13-14.[68] Another Russian milblogger claimed on December 15 that elements of the Russian 3rd Battalion (28th

Motorized Rifle Regiment, 70th Motorized Rifle Division, 18th Combined Arms Army) are operating in the Kherson direction.[69]

Russian forces resumed air strikes on Kherson Oblast on December 15. Ukraine's Southern Operational Command stated that Russian forces conducted five air strikes with 25 glide bombs and an unspecified number of Kh-31P missiles over Kherson Oblast.[70] Ukrainian Southern Operational Command Spokesperson Captain First Rank Nataliya Humenyuk stated that Russian forces resumed glide bomb strikes in the Kherson direction on December 15 after poor weather conditions prevented air strikes in recent days.

# Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 15, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



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

Kremlin newswire *TASS* reported on December 14 that “Grom” special units (elite anti-drug special units of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs [MVD]) will fully transition to being subordinated to

Rosgvardia in early 2024.[71] An unspecified Russian official told TASS that the transition process has already begun and will take several months to complete.[72] The Russian government formally transferred "Grom" special units to the control of Rosgvardia in July 2023 following the Wagner Group's armed rebellion in June 2023.[73]

Kyrgyzstan is producing Russian armored vehicles at the country's first defense industrial base (DIB) enterprise. Kremlin newswire TASS reported on December 11 that Kyrgyz Defense Minister Baktybek Bekbolotov stated during a press conference that Kyrgyzstan is assembling Russian "GAZ-66M" armored vehicles in Balykchy, Kyrgyzstan.[74] Bekbolotov stated that Russia provided some of the components for the vehicles and that assembly of the vehicles is taking place at a Russian repair base for weapons and military equipment in Balykchy.[75] Regional outlet *Asia TV* reported that Bekbolotov stated that the "assembly plant," likely referring to the Russian repair base, has reached its full production capacity and is the first enterprise in Kyrgyzstan's DIB.[76] Bekbolotov did not specify how many armored vehicles the plant will produce.[77] Kyrgyz and Russian military officials held negotiations regarding bilateral military and military-technical cooperation on December 6 and 7.[78] A Kremlin-affiliated Russian milblogger praised the initiative on December 15 and claimed that the plant's armored vehicles will likely be popular, despite the channel's claimed propensity to "doubt" similar initiatives in other former Soviet countries.[79]

Russian authorities continue efforts to secure additional social benefits for Russian servicemembers and their families. The Russian State Duma "Working Group on the Special Military Operation ("SVO")" stated on December 15 that the Duma adopted six bills that the working group proposed during the Duma's fall session. The bills include measures formalizing priority college and technical school enrollment for Russian servicemen fighting in Ukraine and their children, terminating surety agreements on behalf of disabled or deceased Russian servicemen, guaranteeing housing payments for family members of deceased Russian law enforcement officers, granting special status to companies that hire Russian veterans, simplifying the procedure for Russian military personnel to rent housing, and approving custodians-in-fact (*fakticheskie vospitateli*) of the children of deceased Russian servicemen as beneficiaries of state insurance.[80]

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

Nothing significant to report.

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

Russian President Vladimir Putin highlighted Russia's intention to build high-speed railways in occupied Ukraine, likely hours after Ukrainian partisans damaged a key railway line in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast. Russian President Vladimir Putin stated during a speech on December 15 at the Congress of Railway Workers in Moscow that Russia will build high-speed railways in occupied Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.[81] The Ukrainian Resistance Center reported that Ukrainian partisans blew up a Russian military train carrying ammunition and fuel from occupied Crimea to Melitopol and Dniprorudny in occupied Zaporizhia Oblast.[82] Ukrainian partisans reportedly damaged the train and railway line at an unspecified location, likely near Melitopol, at approximately 0800 local time.[83] The Ukrainian Resistance Center stated that the railway line plays a key role in Russian logistics.[84]

## **Russian Information Operations and Narratives**

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitri Peskov skirted direct questions related to a possible future Trump or Republican presidency during an interview with *NBC* on December 15. Peskov stated that Putin is prepared to work with “anyone who will understand that from now on you have to be more careful with Russia and you have to take account its concerns” and noted that the war in Ukraine is too complicated to resolve in one day.[85] Peskov accused the West of waging war against Russia by providing military aid to Ukraine and claimed that US military aid to Ukraine is a waste of “taxpayer dollars.”[86]

The Ukrainian Resistance Center obtained and released a copy of a report written by the Russian Academy of Sciences on December 15 detailing Russia’s plan to “break up” the European Union (EU) and delegitimize NATO during and following the war in Ukraine.[87] The report stated that Russia will attempt to take advantage of internal strife and domestic political divides in European countries, particularly France, to weaken the EU.[88] Russia will spread anti-US sentiments among the “world majority” (countries currently neutral towards Russia) to unify them against the US and US-led international organizations.[89] The report states that Russia will insist that China or a “friendly” Arab country station peacekeepers in Ukraine and that the Baltic states “demilitarize” after the war in order to humiliate NATO.[90] The Ukrainian Resistance Center noted that the report defines the “delegitimization of NATO” as one of Russia’s main goals for the war in Ukraine.[91] The report discourages Russian officials from negotiating with NATO and encourages them to increase nuclear rhetoric to intimidate European countries with phrases such as “Article Five will not protect you.”[92] ISW cannot independently authenticate the report.

## **Significant activity in Belarus (Russian efforts to increase its military presence in Belarus and further integrate Belarus into Russian-favorable frameworks and Wagner Group activity in Belarus)**

The Belarusian Ministry of Defense (MoD) stated on December 15 that unspecified anti-aircraft missile units conducted combat exercises with S-300 and S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems at an unspecified location in Belarus.[93]

**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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