

Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, December 20, 2023

Nicole Wolkov, Christina Harward, Karolina Hird, Kateryna Stepanenko, George Barros, and Frederick W. Kagan

December 20, 2023, 6pm 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 12:30pm ET on December 20. ISW will cover subsequent reports in the December 21 Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment.

Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill made a series of anti-migrant and xenophobic remarks that directly contradict Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ongoing efforts to reestablish the inclusive Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) ideology. During the Moscow Diocesan Assembly on December 20, Kirill blamed migrants for increasingly threatening interreligious and interethnic peace in Russia by refusing to integrate into Russian society and forming criminal and extremist organizations.[1] Kirill added that life for the ethnically Russian “indigenous population” is almost unbearable in some areas, including Moscow, claiming that if such trends continue then the Russian Orthodox people will “lose Russia.” Kirill’s statements contrast with Putin’s recent efforts to present himself as a centrist figure and to reestablish the concept of the Russian World, which includes all people of different ethnicities and religious affiliations who have lived or are living in geographical areas that belonged to Ancient Rus (Kyivan Rus), the Kingdom of Muscovy, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the contemporary Russian Federation.[2] Putin notably also stated during the Meeting of the Council of Legislators on December 20 that the Russian constitution and government are trying to ensure harmony in a diverse and large Russia – reemphasizing his efforts to present Russia as an inclusive and harmonious multicultural Russian state.[3]

Putin, on the one hand, has been increasingly reimagining himself as a modern tsar who is defending Russian sovereignty to justify his war in Ukraine and to appease his ultranationalist constituencies who tend to have more intolerant views on religion and Russian identity.[4] But Putin has, on the other hand, been trying to seem to be an inclusive leader to incentivize all religious and ethnic groups to support his regime and war efforts. ISW assessed on November 28 that Kirill’s anti-migrant and xenophobic rhetoric is more closely aligned with Russian government policies towards migrants and non-Russian ethnicities in Russia than Putin’s more inclusive rhetoric in the context of the Russian World.[5] These narratives and policies are thus contradictory and may ultimately complicate Putin’s efforts to appease different constituency groups in Russia and may trigger further interethnic and interreligious conflicts.

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov explicitly stated that the Kremlin is uninterested in negotiations with Ukraine, suggesting that the Kremlin is moving away from its

information operation meant to feign interest in negotiations. Peskov responded to a question on December 20 about Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's December 19 statement that the issue of negotiations with Russia is currently "irrelevant," stating that the Kremlin has repeatedly said that there is no "basis" or "foundation" for negotiations with Ukraine.[6] Peskov also stated that the "prerequisites" for negotiations are absent, likely referring to Russia's unchanged maximalist objectives in Ukraine - which are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender.[7] ISW has long assessed that the Kremlin does not intend to engage in serious negotiations with Ukraine or the West in good faith.[8] The Kremlin previously pushed information operations feigning interest in negotiations with Ukraine in order to cast itself as a responsible party and blame Ukraine for refusing "reasonable" Russian negotiations, but the Kremlin appears to be moving away from this information operation, as ISW suggested on December 15.[9]

Russian forces conducted another series of drone and missile strikes against Ukraine on the night of December 19 to 20. Ukrainian military sources reported that Russian forces launched 19 Shahed-131/136 drones at Ukraine from Chauda and Balaklava, occupied Crimea, and that Ukrainian forces shot down 18 of the drones over Kherson, Dnipropetrovsk, Vinnytsia, Khmelnytskyi, Kyiv, Chernihiv, and Kirovohrad oblasts.[10] The Ukrainian Air Force also reported that Russian forces launched two S-300 missiles at Kharkiv Oblast from Belgorod Oblast.[11] The Kyiv City Military Administration noted that this is the fifth Russian air attack against Kyiv Oblast in the month of December.[12]

The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled Africa Corps announced a recruitment campaign targeting former and current Wagner Group personnel and people with combat experience in the war in Ukraine. The Africa Corps, a Russian MoD initiative to expand Russian military presence in the Middle East and Africa, announced that it started recruitment on December 20.[13] Africa-focused Russian media outlet *African Initiative* stated that Russian Deputy Defense Minister Colonel General Yunus-Bek Yevkurov is "supervising" the new unspecified leadership of the Africa Corps.[14] The Africa Corps claimed that its command staff consists of former combat commanders of elite units in the Russian military and unspecified private military companies (PMCs) - possibly referring to the Redut PMC (affiliated with the Main Directorate of the Russian General Staff [GRU]).[15] The Africa Corps advertised an unspecified "high salary," but noted that interested applicants who are currently fighting in the war in Ukraine cannot transfer to serve in the Africa Corps, though active-duty Russian military personnel not fighting in the war can transfer to serve in the Africa Corps.[16] The Africa Corps also clarified that an individual cannot transfer from Rosgvardia to the Africa Corps before completing their Rosgvardia contract.[17] The Africa Corps' desire to clarify eligibility for service suggests that its advertisement campaign has successfully generated interest among former Wagner personnel given that some Wagner fighters signed contracts with the Russian MoD or Rosgvardia after the death of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023.[18] The Africa Corps suggested that it would operate in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso - areas consistent with ISW's previous assessment of the Africa Corps' area of operations.[19]

Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin discussed bilateral economic cooperation with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on December 20. Mishustin stated that the previous two Russian-Chinese summits in March and October 2023 indicated the importance of further strengthening the "comprehensive partnership" and "strategic interaction" between the two countries.[20] Mishustin and Xi highlighted increased Russian-Chinese trade in 2023, which has reportedly already surpassed its goal of \$200 billion, and Mishustin continued to claim that Russian

and Chinese transactions are almost entirely done in national currencies (the yuan and ruble). China and Russia issued a joint communique on December 20 which stated that the “comprehensive strategic partnership” between the two countries is in line with the two states’ interests, not aimed at third parties, and not subject to external influence.[21] The communique highlighted Russian-Chinese energy and investment cooperation and the development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The communique included Russian statements about Taiwan but did not mention Ukraine, which suggests that the Kremlin continues to be concerned with China’s reticence to participate fully in the no-limits partnership that Russia wants to establish, and that China continues to hold the upper hand in the Russian-Chinese relationship.[22]

Moscow State University (MGU) is reportedly ending its master's program in “information and hybrid warfare” aimed at teaching students how to create information operations and conduct hybrid warfare, generating outrage from Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov. MGU Higher School of Telecommunications Dean Vitaly Tretyakov defended MGU’s decision to discontinue the master’s program on Solovyov’s show on December 18 because students graduating from the program would face difficulties finding employment abroad.[23] Tretyakov also argued that the master’s program, which offers a course in “special propaganda” (a Russian term for information and psychological operations), would threaten MGU’s reputation.[24] Solovyov dismissed Tretyakov’s explanations and questioned the patriotism of MGU’s students and faculty.[25] Solovyov praised the now-closing master’s program and noted that Russian universities need to teach “special propaganda” and combat Western narratives of history.[26] Former Duma Deputy Elena Panina echoed Solovyov’s support for the program and claimed that the Russian government should fund similar programs at various universities.[27] MGU announced the creation of the master’s program in 2022, the same year it admitted its first class of students, reportedly to teach and promote Russian objectives for the war in Ukraine.[28] MGU also is reportedly closing the program due to the low salaries of the professors teaching its courses and an ongoing scandal regarding faculty bribery.[29]

The Kremlin continues to set conditions to create a veneer of legitimacy over the upcoming March 2024 presidential election. Russian Central Election Commission (CEC) Chairperson Ella Pamfilova reported on December 20 that the CEC has already received applications for 16 individuals who are running as presidential candidates and that 29 Russian federal subjects will use remote electronic voting for the first time during the presidential election.[30] ISW has long assessed that the Kremlin uses the remote electronic voting system to manipulate election results.[31] Russian State Duma Chairperson Vyacheslav Volodin claimed that Russia has developed all the necessary legal frameworks to ensure that the election is “competitive, open, and legitimate.”[32] By contrast, a Russian insider source claimed that the CEC has been tasked with ensuring a voter turnout of 75 percent, 80 to 85 percent of which will reportedly vote for Putin.[33] While ISW cannot independently verify the veracity of the insider source's claim, the insinuation that the Kremlin is interested in creating the guise of Putin's legitimate election is consistent with ISW's assessment that Putin remains interested in engaging in legal theater to legitimize his regime.[34]

Key Takeaways:

- **Head of the Kremlin-controlled Russian Orthodox Church Patriarch Kirill made a series of anti-migrant and xenophobic remarks that directly contradict Russian**

President Vladimir Putin's ongoing efforts to reestablish the inclusive Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) ideology.

- **Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov explicitly stated that the Kremlin is uninterested in negotiations with Ukraine, suggesting that the Kremlin is moving away from its information operation meant to feign interest in negotiations.**
- **The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD)-controlled Africa Corps announced a recruitment campaign targeting former and current Wagner Group personnel and people with combat experience in the war in Ukraine.**
- **Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin discussed bilateral economic cooperation with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on December 20.**
- **Moscow State University (MGU) is reportedly ending its master's program in "information and hybrid warfare" aimed at teaching students how to create information operations and conduct hybrid warfare, generating outrage from Russian propagandist Vladimir Solovyov.**
- **The Kremlin continues to set conditions to create a veneer of legitimacy over the upcoming March 2024 presidential election.**
- **Russian forces made a confirmed advance north of Bakhmut and continued positional meeting engagements along the entire line of contact.**
- **Russian officials issued military summonses to migrants at a naturalization ceremony on December 20 as part of ongoing efforts to target naturalized migrants for crypto-mobilization efforts and to placate the Russian ultranationalist community.**
- **Russian occupation administrators continue to use educational organizations to facilitate the temporary deportation of Ukrainians to Russia.**

Assessed Control of Terrain in Ukraine and Main Russian Maneuver Axes as of December 20, 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 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

NOTE: ISW has restructured the operational kinetic axis sections of the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment to more accurately reflect the positional nature of fighting on the battlefield. Operational kinetic axis paragraphs will be shorter and more synthetic to convey the same assessment in fewer words and not to overwhelm the reader with long lists of settlement names. The level of detail included in the report has not decreased. The report’s endnotes still contain the same level of sourcing, and ISW encourages readers interested in tactical granular details to read them. ISW will explicitly flag major operational inflections in axis text as usual, so the lack of named settlements should not be taken as an indication of gains or losses of territory or changes in the frontline. ISW will lead operational axes with confirmed map changes to accord with the daily map products produced by the Geospatial Intelligence Team, supplemented by Ukrainian and Russian claims, and will also list order of battle (ORBAT) details in each axis section when available.

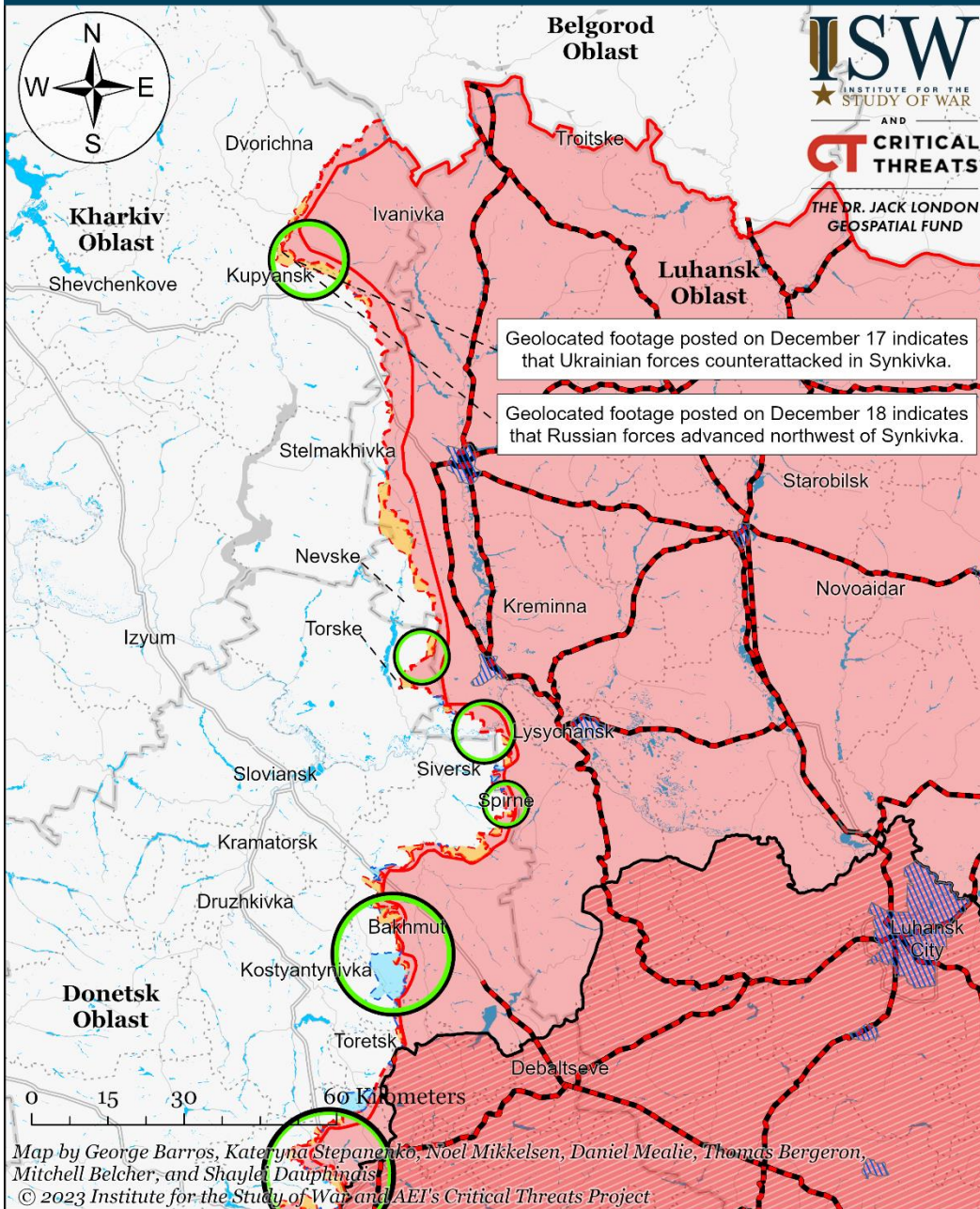
Russian Main Effort – Eastern Ukraine

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 milbloggers claimed that Russian forces captured two unspecified positions on the eastern bank of the Oskil River in the Kupyansk direction on December 20, but ISW has not observed evidence for this advance.[35] Russian forces reportedly continued ground attacks northeast of Kupyansk near Synkivka, east of Petropavlivka, and near Ivanivka; and Ukrainian forces reportedly counterattacked near Synkivka.[36]

Russian and Ukrainian forces conducted positional engagements west of Kreminna near Terny and south of Kreminna near Dibrova and the Serebryanske forest area.[37] A Russian source indicated that elements of the Russian 204th “Akhmat” Spetsnaz detachment and the Russian 201st Military Base (Central Military District) are operating in the Kreminna forest and captured unspecified positions in the area.[38] The presence of 201st Military Base elements, which are based in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, indicates that Russian forces are continuing to deploy some of their forces from Tajikistan to reinforce the war effort.[39]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Luhansk Oblast as of December 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



Map by George Barros, Kateryna Stepanenko, Noel Mikkelsen, Daniel Mealie, Thomas Bergeron, Mitchell Belcher, and Shayla Dauphinais
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	Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours		Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*		Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
	Russian Ground Lines of Communication		Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory		Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
	Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24		Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory		

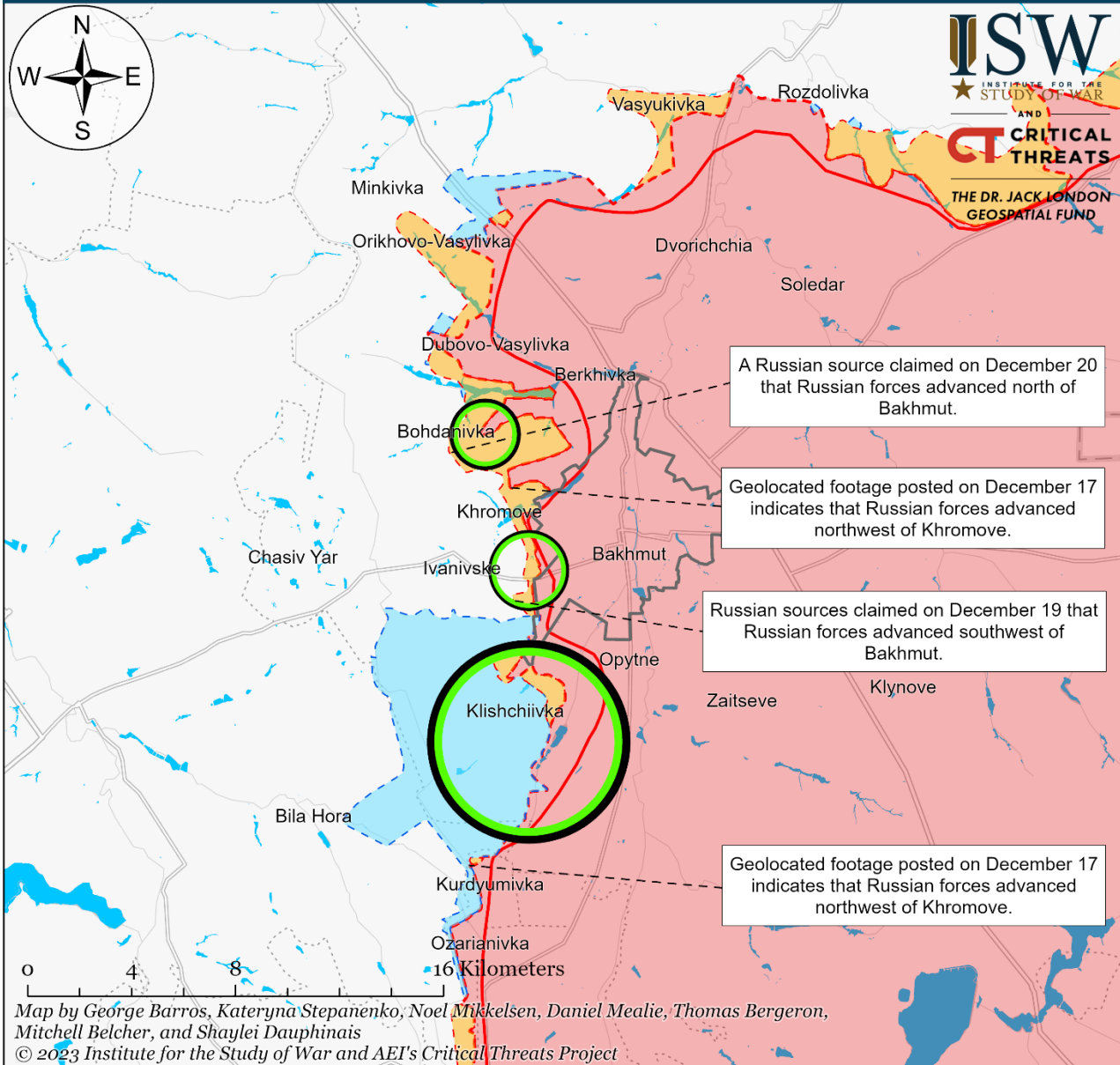
* Assessed Russian advances are areas where ISW assesses Russian forces have operated in or launched attacks against but do not control.

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 recently made a marginal confirmed advance north of Bakhmut. Geolocated footage published on December 19 indicates that Russian forces marginally advanced southwest of Spirne (25km northeast of Bakhmut).[40] The Russian Ministry of Defense (MoD) claimed that Ukrainian forces unsuccessfully attacked near Pazeno, 15km north of Bakhmut.[41]

Russian forces reportedly advanced west of Bakhmut on December 20, but ISW is unable to confirm changes to the frontline in this area. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces advanced along a front 530 meters wide and 170 meters deep west of Khromove and along a front three kilometers wide near Ivanivske, although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of these claims.[42] Russian milbloggers claimed that elements of the Russian “Sever-V” Brigade of the Volunteer Corps advanced northwest of Bakhmut near Bohdanivka and that Russian forces advanced southwest of Bakhmut near Klishchiivka and Kurdyumivka.[43] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that fighting is ongoing on Bakhmut’s northwestern and southwestern flanks.[44] A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are increasing their tempo of operations north of Klishchivka.[45] Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) Advisor Yan Gagin claimed that Ukrainian forces counterattacked west of Bakhmut.[46] Elements of the Chechen “Sever-Akhmat” 78th Motorized Rifle Regiment (42nd Motorized Rifle Division, 58th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) with elements of the Russian 88th Motorized Rifle Brigade (2nd Luhansk People’s Republic Army Corps) are reportedly operating near Klishchiivka, and elements of the Russian 105th Motorized Rifle Regiment (1st Donetsk People’s Republic Army Corps) are reportedly operating west of Bakhmut.[47] Elements of the Russian 98th Airborne (VDV) Division reportedly continue to operate near Bakhmut.[48]

Assessed Control of Terrain in Bakhmut as of December 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



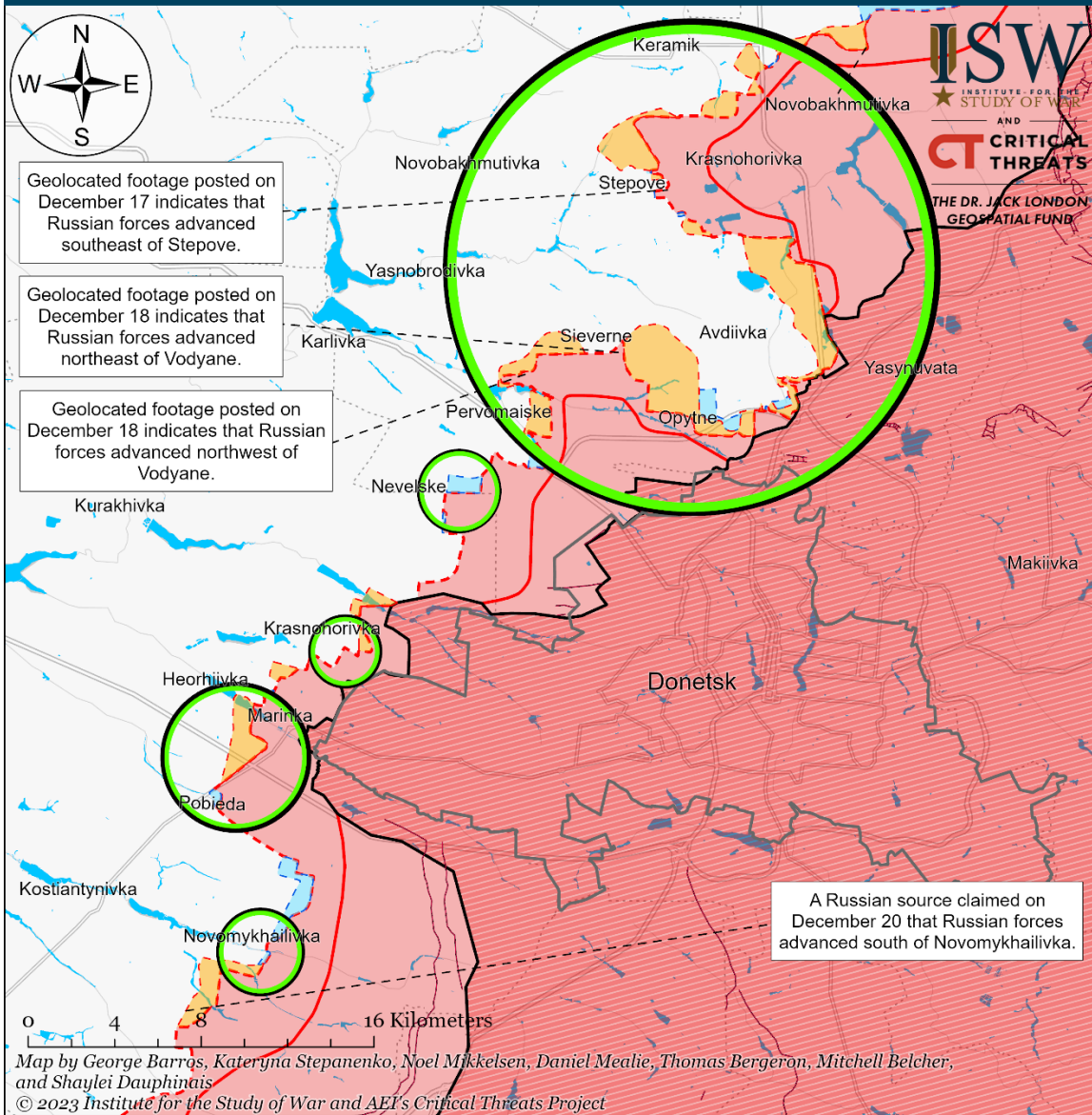
- Bakhmut City Limits
- Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare

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

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced along a three-kilometer-wide front in the Bakhmut direction. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced up to 170 meters along a 530-meter-wide front toward the Popov Forest. A Russian source claimed on December 19 that Russian forces advanced up to 530 meters along a front up to one kilometer wide southwest of Bakhmut, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources.

Russian forces reportedly advanced near Avdiivka on December 20, but there are no confirmed changes in the frontline in this area. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces made marginal advances southwest of Avdiivka near Pervomaiske, although ISW has not observed visual evidence of this claim.^[49] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported that Russian forces attacked northwest, west, and southwest of Avdiivka and near the Avdiivka industrial zone and Coke Plant.^[50] A Russian milblogger claimed that Ukrainian forces are counterattacking around Avdiivka.^[51] Ukrainian Tavriisk Group of Forces Spokesperson Colonel Oleksandr Shtupun stated on December 20 that Russian forces have lost almost 25,000 personnel fighting in Donetsk Oblast in about the past two months, and that 80 percent of these losses have occurred in the Avdiivka direction.^[52] Shtupun also stated that the Russian military often forms new companies from degraded units to conduct attacks near Avdiivka, though some well-trained and well-equipped units continue to fight in the area.^[53]

Assessed Control of Terrain near Donetsk City as of December 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



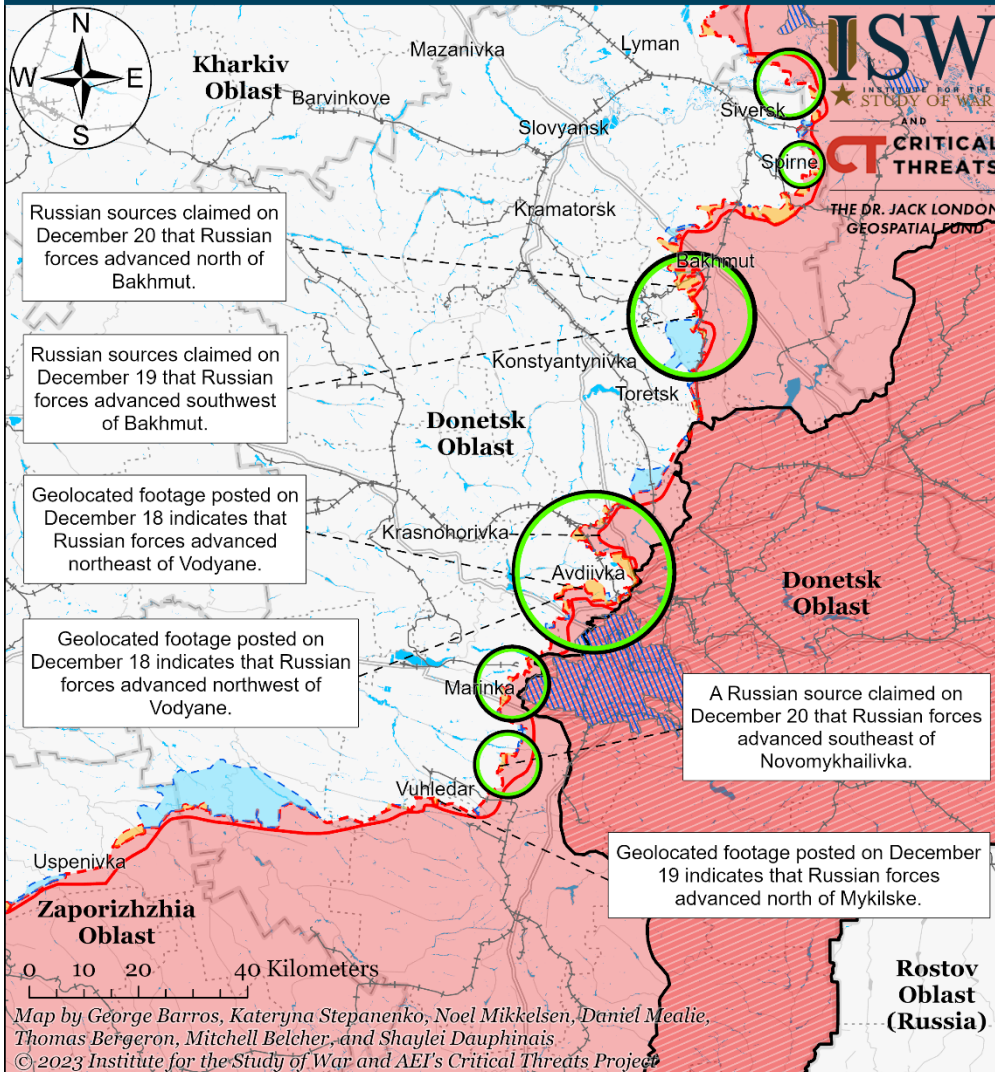
- Donetsk City Limits
- ▬ Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*
- ▬ Claimed Ukrainian Counteroffensives
- ▬ Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory
- ▬ Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory
- ▬ Russian Field Fortifications

* 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 20 that Russian forces advanced one kilometer near Novomykhailivka. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced up to 780 meters along a front up to 1.75 kilometers wide south and southeast of Novomykhailivka, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources. Russian sources claimed on December 18 that Russian forces broke through Ukrainian defenses and advanced up to 800 meters along a 1.85-to-two-kilometers wide front south of Avdiivka, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources. Russian sources claimed on December 18 that Russian forces advanced between 350 and 500 meters along a 350-meter-wide front in western Vodyane. A Russian source claimed on December 18 that Russian forces control 99% of Marinka. A Russian source claimed on December 16 that Russian forces advanced 200 meters south from the Avdiivka wastewater treatment facility.

Russian forces reportedly advanced west and southwest of Donetsk City on December 20, but there have been no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area. A Russian milblogger claimed, allegedly citing an unspecified Ukrainian military analyst, that Russian forces advanced one kilometer near Novomykhailivka and advanced along a front up to 1.75 kilometers wide 780 meters deep southeast of Novomykhailivka.[54] Russian and Ukrainian sources reported ongoing fighting near Marinka, Krasnohorivka, Novomykhailivka, and Pobieda.[55] Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian forces attacked west and southwest of Donetsk City near Marinka and Novomykhailivka.[56] Elements of the 33rd Motorized Rifle Regiment (20th Motorized Rifle Division, 8th Combined Arms Army, Southern Military District) reportedly continue to assault Ukrainian positions southwest of Marinka.[57]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Donetsk as of December 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



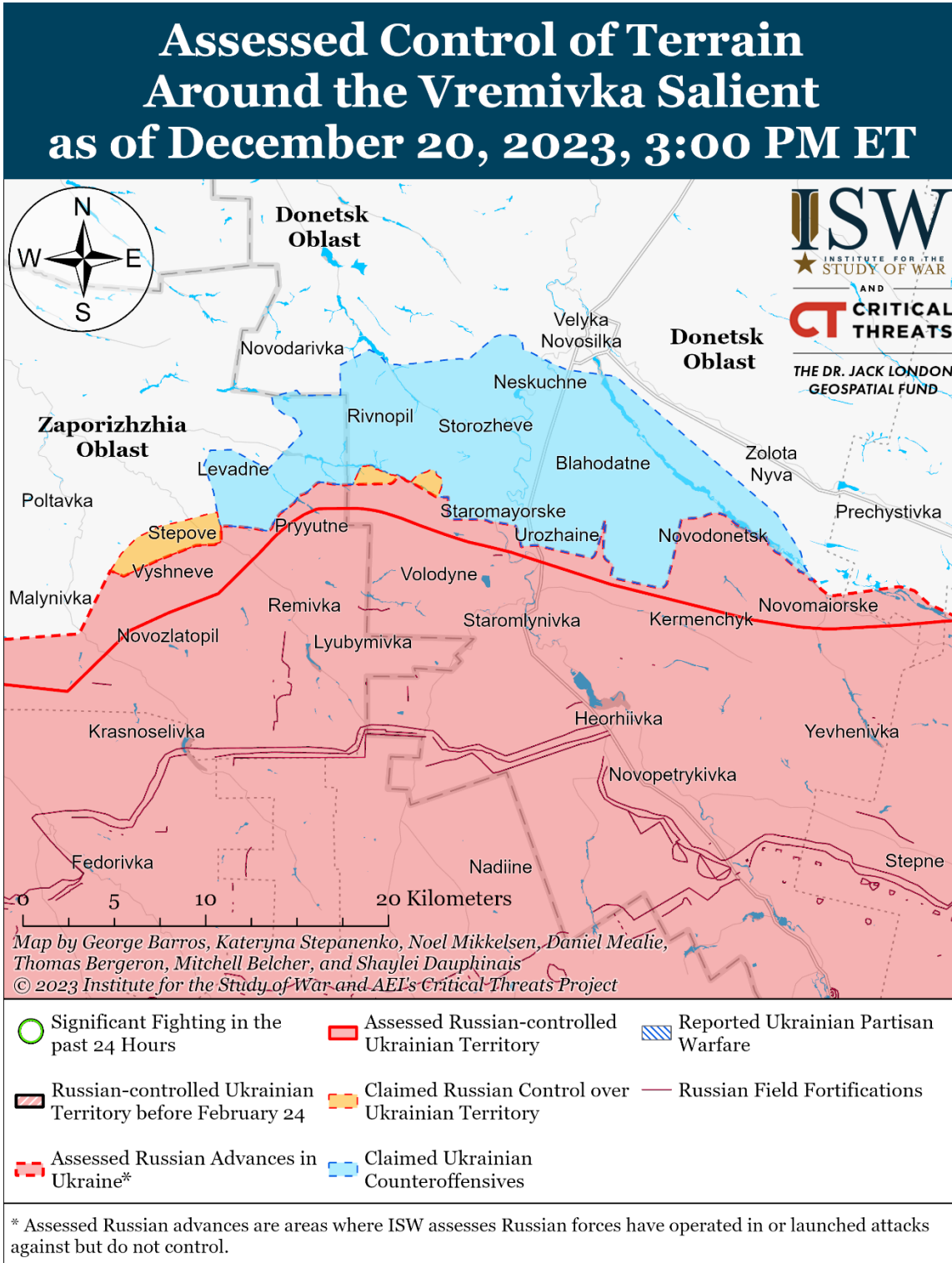
Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours	Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory	Major Railroads
Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24	Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory	Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare
Assessed Russian Advances in Ukraine*	Claimed Ukrainian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

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

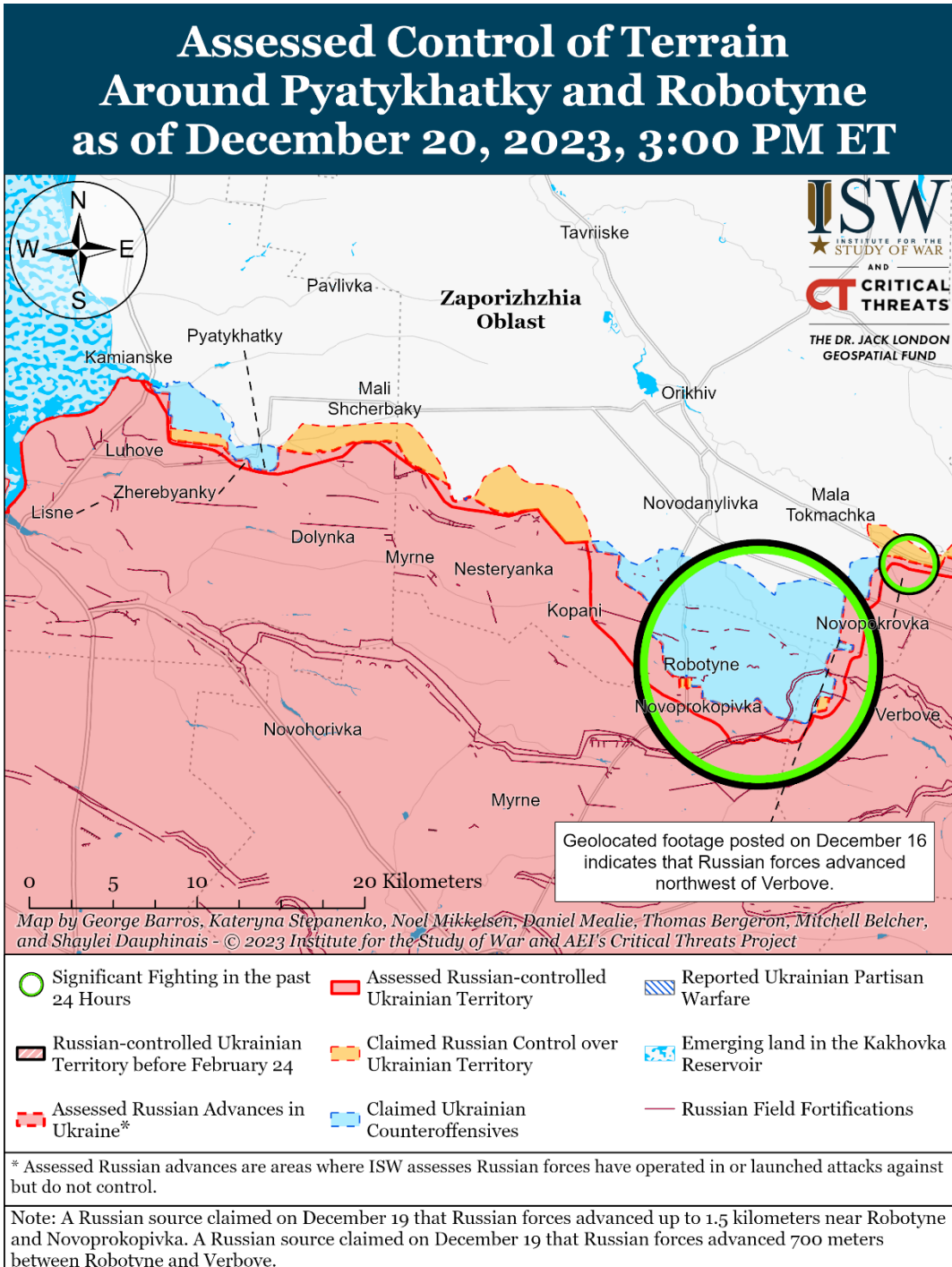
Note: A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced along a three-kilometer-wide front in the Bakhmut direction. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced up to 170 meters along a 530-meter-wide front toward the Popov Forest. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced one kilometer near Novomykhailivka. A Russian source claimed on December 20 that Russian forces advanced up to 780 meters along a front up to 1.75 kilometers wide south and southeast of Novomykhailivka, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources. Russian sources claimed on December 18 that Russian forces broke through Ukrainian defenses and advanced up to 800 meters along a 1.85-to-two-kilometers wide front south of Avdiivka, citing unspecified Ukrainian sources. Russian sources claimed on December 18 that Russian forces advanced between 350 and 500 meters along a 350-meter-wide front in western Vodyane. A Russian source claimed on December 18 that Russian forces control 99% of Marinka.

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

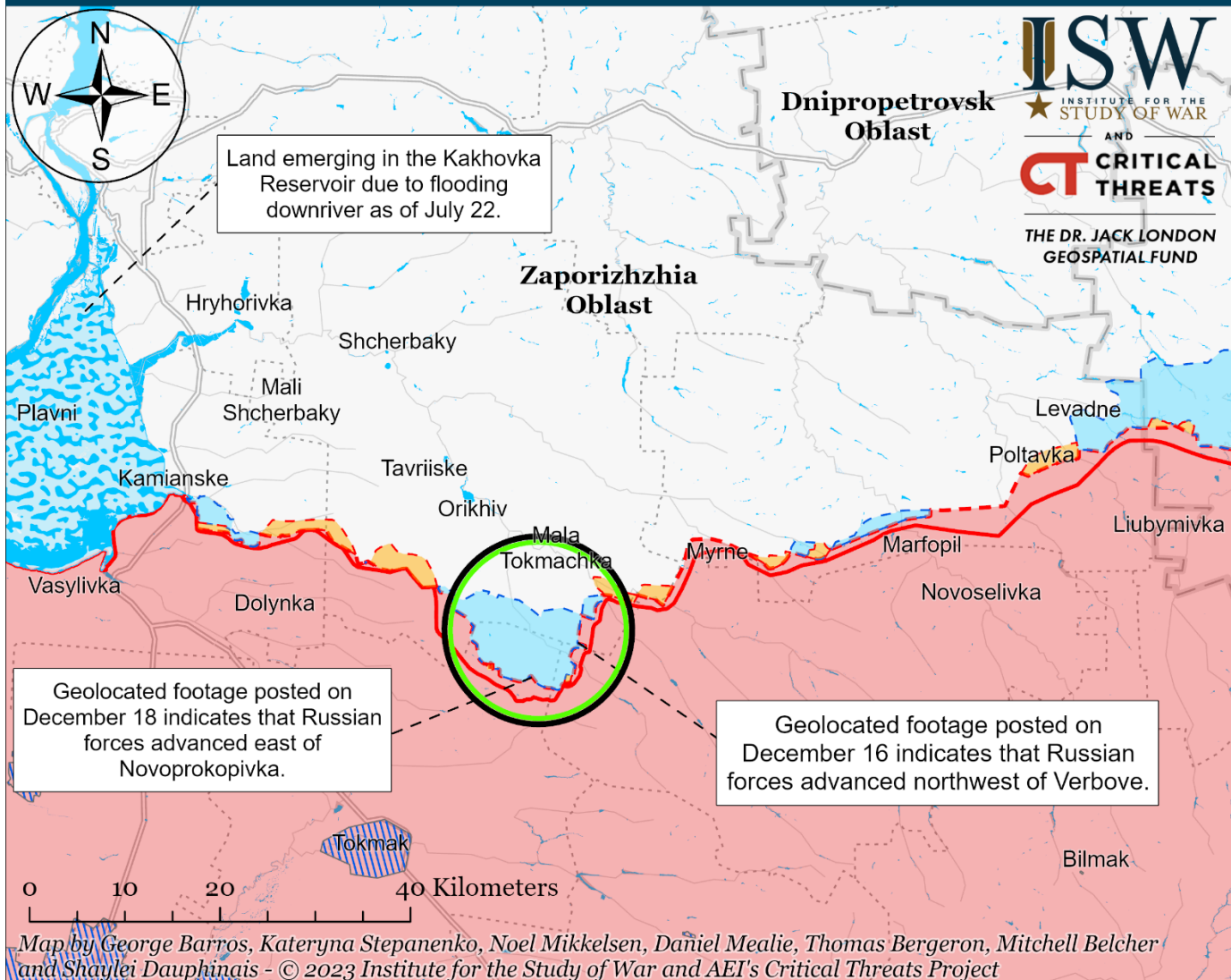
Russian and Ukrainian forces continued positional meeting engagements in the Donetsk-Zaporizhia Oblast border area on December 20, but there were no confirmed changes to the frontline. A Russian milblogger claimed that Russian forces are continuing to pressure Ukrainian forces south of Velyka Novosilka near Staromykhailivka and Pryyutne.[58]



Russian forces reportedly advanced in western Zaporizhzhia Oblast on December 20. Several milbloggers claimed that Russian forces advanced up to 1.5 kilometers near Robotyne and Novopropkopiivka (just south of Robotyne) and up to several hundred meters near Verbove (east of Robotyne), although ISW has not observed visual confirmation of any Russian gains in this area.[59] Some Russian sources claimed that Ukrainian activity in this sector has decreased and that Ukrainian forces have largely shifted to defensive operations.[60] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian force repelled Russian attacks west of Verbove, south of Robotyne, and west of Novopokrovka (northeast of Robotyne).[61] Elements of the 247th Air Assault (VDV) Regiment (7th VDV Division) and 76th VDV Division are reportedly operating near Verbove.[62]



Assessed Control of Terrain Around Zaporizhzhia as of December 20, 2023, 3:00 PM ET



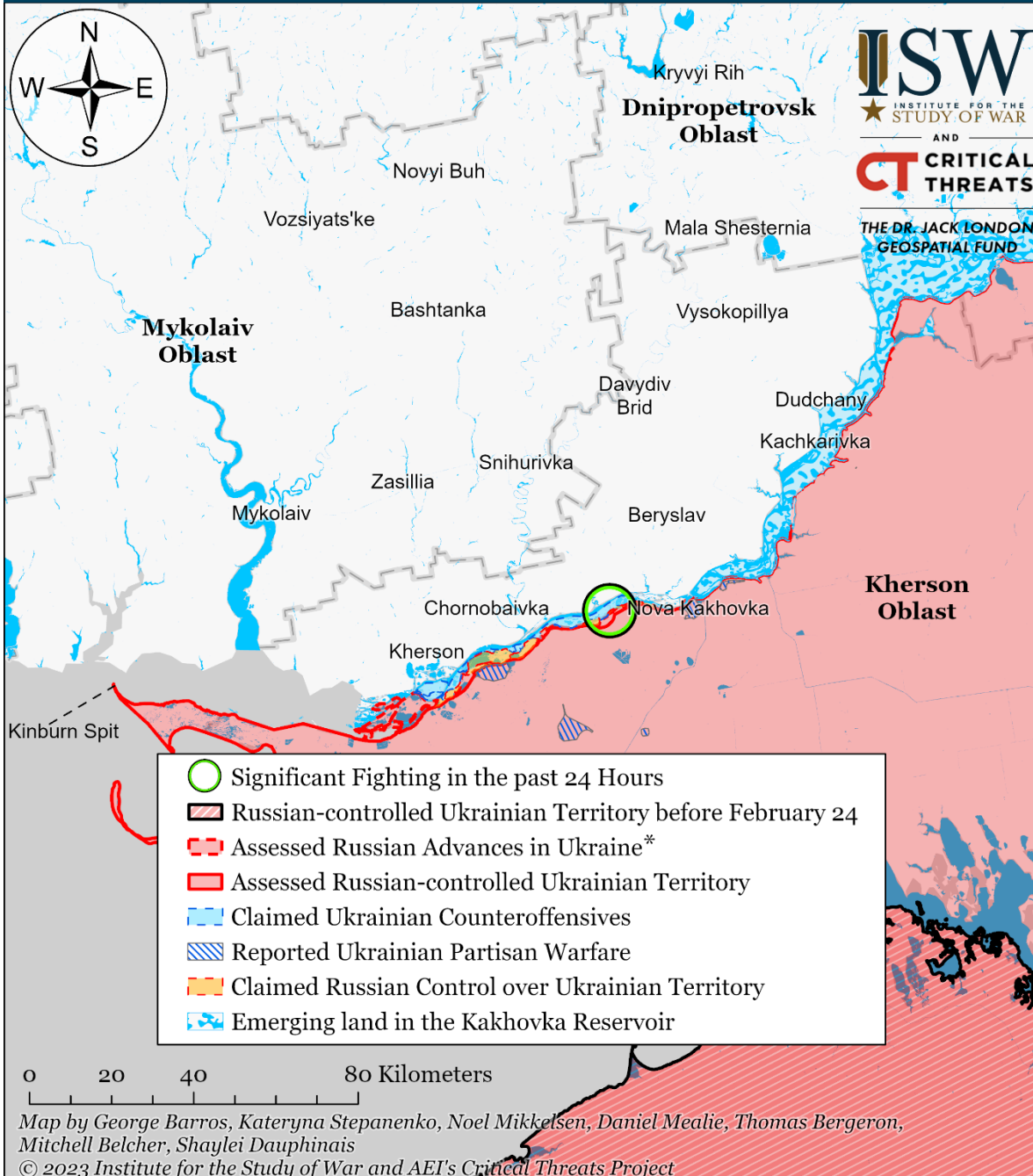
- | | | |
|---|--|---|
| Significant Fighting in the past 24 Hours | Assessed Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory | Reported Ukrainian Partisan Warfare |
| Russian-controlled Ukrainian Territory before February 24 | Claimed Russian Control over Ukrainian Territory | Emerging land in the Kakhovka Reservoir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

* 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 19 that Russian forces advanced up to 1.5 kilometers near Robotyne and Novopropkivka. A Russian source claimed on December 19 that Russian forces advanced 700 meters between Robotyne and Verbove.

Ukrainian forces maintain a presence on the east (left) bank of Dnipro River in Kherson Oblast as of December 20, but there have been no confirmed changes to the frontline in this area.^[63] Russian milbloggers claimed that Ukrainian forces are transferring limited forces to the Krynky area and holding defensive positions in occupied buildings under heavy Russian drone, artillery, and air strikes on the east bank.^[64] The Ukrainian General Staff reported that Ukrainian forces repelled 37 attacks on east bank positions throughout the past day.^[65] Elements of the newly formed 18th Combined Arms Army (Southern Military District [SMD]); 49th Combined Arms Army (SMD); and 7th and 104th VDV Divisions are reportedly operating in the Kherson direction.^[66]

Assessed Control of Terrain Around Kherson and Mykolaiv as of December 20, 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.

Note: The Ukrainian counteroffensive layer displays areas previously assigned to the Russian control, Russian advances, or Russian claims layers where ISW now assesses that Ukrainian forces have established a presence beyond a short-term raid. Inclusion of an area on this layer does not imply that ISW assesses that the area is part of any upcoming Ukrainian counteroffensive operation.

Note: A Russian source claimed on December 20 that the Ukrainian bridgehead on the left (east) bank of the Dniro River has been reduced to an area of less than one square kilometer.

Ukrainian forces likely conducted a strike on Russian military assets in occupied Crimea overnight on December 19-20. A prominent Russian milblogger claimed that Russian air defense forces repelled a Ukrainian drone attack on Crimea overnight, but Ukrainian and Russian opposition sources reported that the Ukrainian strikes hit the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) Center for Long-Range Space Communications and a Federal Security Service (FSB) unit in occupied Crimea.[67] ISW has not yet observed visual evidence of this purported strike, however.

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

Russian officials issued military summonses to migrants at a naturalization ceremony on December 20 as part of ongoing efforts to target naturalized migrants for crypto-mobilization efforts and to placate the Russian ultranationalist community. The St. Petersburg Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) stated that representatives of local military registration and enlistment offices and officials from the military investigative department of the St. Petersburg Investigative Committee issued summonses to 11 new Russian citizens from neighboring countries at their citizenship ceremony.[68] ISW continues to assess that the Russian government is struggling to reconcile the incoherent and competing objectives of exploiting migrant labor to alleviate Russian labor shortages and prioritizing crypto-mobilization efforts to send migrants to the frontline.[69]

A Russian State Duma working group proposed measures aimed at incentivizing volunteer military recruitment and increasing private donations to the Russian military. Secretary General of the United Russia Party Andrey Turchak stated on December 20 that the “Special Military Operation” Working Group adopted measures to expand support to military personnel and their families, including clarifications on the procedure of lifting restrictions on the accounts of debtors fighting in Ukraine; the extension of the special status of the children of veterans when they are 18 years old and have completed school; and the development of procedures for veterans and disabled combatants to receive priority medical care.[70] Turchak also stated that the working group proposed eliminating the state duties currently required for registering military and humanitarian equipment donations, likely in an effort to appease the ultranationalist community that has been avidly demanding more relaxed processes for such donations.[71]

The Ukrainian General Staff reported on December 20 that Russian forces are using low-quality artillery shells from North Korea that are occasionally exploding in barrels, leading to Russian personnel and equipment losses.[72] The Ukrainian General Staff stated that Russian forces, especially the “Dnepr” Grouping of Forces operating in southern Ukraine, are using these shells due to insufficient domestic production. ISW previously assessed that recent deliveries of North Korean artillery shells have supplemented Russia’s likely largely expended stocks of Soviet-era stocks.[73]

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

Russian state news outlet *TASS* reported on December 20 that a source close to the Russian military stated that Russian forces have begun to use the new “Koalitsiya-SV” self-propelled artillery gun in Ukraine.[74] The source reportedly stated that the “Koalitsiya-SV” is meant to make a “decisive difference” in Russian counterbattery capabilities. A Russian milblogger claimed on December 20 that the “Koalitsiya-SV” is the first Russian artillery system that is not inferior to 155mm NATO systems in

terms of range, accuracy, and rate of fire.[75] Russian sources have repeatedly complained about insufficient counterbattery capabilities in various sectors of the front in Ukraine.[76]

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 occupation administrators continue to use educational organizations to facilitate the temporary deportation of Ukrainians to Russia. The Kherson Oblast occupation administration reported on December 20 that six families that Russian authorities previously evacuated from Kherson City (likely before Russia's withdrawal from right bank Kherson Oblast in November 2022) and elsewhere in Kherson Oblast went on "vacation" to Sochi, Krasnodar Krai between December 8-18 with the public educational organization "Knowledge" ("Znanie").[77] ISW previously assessed that Russia's 2022 "evacuation" of the civilian population of Kherson City and Kherson Oblast was part of a larger scheme to resettle large populations of Ukrainians further into Russian-controlled territory, in an apparent violation of international law.[78]

Chechen Republic Head Ramzan Kadyrov is using the religious leaders of his regime to extend religious influence in occupied Ukraine. Kadyrov stated on December 19 that a delegation led by Chechen Supreme Mufti Salah Mezhiev visited occupied Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts and led a Friday prayer service in occupied Mariupol.[79] Mezhiev reportedly visited Chechen fighters who are operating in Ukraine, met with Muslim community leaders of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) to provide them with humanitarian aid, and attended a competition at a local madrassa in occupied Luhansk Oblast. Russian occupation authorities have long used religion as a tool to increase social control of occupied areas of Ukraine, and Russia is likely relying on Kadyrov and Chechen authorities to cater to Muslim communities in occupied areas that may not be as receptive to efforts by the Russian Orthodox Church to consolidate occupational control.[80]

Russian Information Operations and Narratives

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated Russian anti-Western narratives during the VI Session of the Russian-Arab Cooperation Forum in Marrakesh, Morocco on December 20.[81] Lavrov claimed that "crisis in Ukraine and situation in the Middle East" show the emerging divisions between the way the "Western minority" and the "World majority" approach crises. Lavrov reiterated the Kremlin's boilerplate narratives about the need for multipolar world order to achieve the Kremlin's objective of creating a world in which Russia has power over key global events.[82]

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova continued promoting false narratives aimed at destabilizing Ukrainian society on December 20. Zakharova falsely claimed that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky perceives the continuation of the war as the only opportunity to remain in power.[83] Zakharova also continued driving Russian narratives that the West is refusing to support Ukraine and that Ukraine is planning a widespread mobilization wave.

Zakharova similarly introduced a false narrative that Russia has never posed a threat to Moldova, despite the fact that Russia has actively stationed Russian personnel in Russia-backed Transnistria, Moldova since 1992.[84] Zakharova’s statement is absurd given that Russia routinely attempts to destabilize Moldova’s pro-Western government.[85]

Armenian TV and Radio Commission revoked the license for the *Radio Tospa* station, which is affiliated with Russian propaganda outlet *Radio Sputnik*, for 30 days due to comments made by Russian propagandist Tigran Keosayan.[86] The Commission fined and revoked *Radio Tospa*’s license in response to statements made during the “Friday with Tigran Keosayan” November 17 program, in which Keosayan reportedly denigrated the honor and dignity of Armenia and its people “without having the moral right to do so as a foreign citizen.” Keosayan reportedly accused Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan of treason, wondering if he would stay “alive” after such treason.[87] The revocation of *Radio Tospa*’s license is likely part of an ongoing Armenian effort to distance itself from Russia’s orbit following Russia’s failure to support Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh crisis in fall 2023.

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

Nothing significant to report.

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

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