



Indicators and Thresholds for Russian Military Operations in Ukraine and/or Belarus

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Russia is setting conditions to conduct military operations against Ukraine and/or in Belarus in the coming weeks or months. The Russian Federation has positioned military forces around Ukraine's border and near the border with Belarus able to initiate offensive operations on very short notice with very little warning. Russian officials and media outlets have been setting conditions in the information space to support such operations. This document is not intended as a forecast or an assessment of the likelihood of any such Russian activities, all of which are also consistent with Russian non-military lines of effort against Ukraine, Belarus, the US, and NATO.

Possible Russian military actions:

- 1) Overt deployment of Russian conventional military forces into Belarus on the pretext of defending against planned NATO aggression.
- 2) Overt deployment of Russian conventional military forces into the Donbas region of Ukraine ostensibly to preempt and prevent a Ukrainian attack on the region.
- 3) Invasion of Ukraine beyond occupied Donbas and Crimea with scenarios ranging from limited incursions (possible) to a full-scale mechanized drive on Kyiv (unlikely).

These activities can be mutually reinforcing and are in no way mutually exclusive.

- Russian forces and information operations are postured to support overt deployments into both Donbas and Belarus simultaneously.
- They could conduct those operations and also drive into unoccupied Ukraine simultaneously, although they would likely require more reinforcements on the Ukrainian border than have yet been observed.
- They could alternatively first deploy into Donbas and Belarus and then invade unoccupied Ukraine as a subsequent phase.

ISW has been forecasting for some time that Russia would deploy its own ground forces into Belarus at some point. We have not forecasted that Russia would deploy its own troops into Donbas, but such a development would not be inconsistent with the general trend of our assessments. We have consistently held that an invasion of unoccupied Ukraine is highly unlikely and would not occur without a major change in the situation and a visible Russian information campaign to set conditions for such an action. We stand by that assessment.

This document is not a forecast or an assessment. It lays out the indicators we are using to refine our assessments and forecasts, noting which ones have tripped, which are partially tripped, and which have not tripped. It then presents the dominant narrative from the Kremlin for each day starting on 22 November, followed by a run-down of key activities by Ukraine and other states.

This is an interim document, which we expect to update regularly. We present this interim assessment and forecast, along with indicators, to help frame ongoing discussions about Russian actions. This is not a finished analytical product.

Military-Political Indicators

Tripped:

1. An increase of Russian command and control (C2) elements inside Donbas or in southern or western Russia near the Russian-Ukrainian border. – *Likely tripped, inferred from 8th Combined Arms Army (CAA) announcing command post exercise in Donbas, and Ukrainian claims of increased Russian logistics support activities in Donbas throughout November 2021.*¹
2. Decreased bandwidth on Russian railways for commercial enterprises since October.² – *The Russian Ministry of Defense is likely moving lots of hardware.*
3. Mobilization of the DNR and LNR militias. – *Likely tripped given DNR/LNR reserves reportedly mobilized under 8th CAA leadership on November 22.*³
4. Mobilization of artillery elements at the regiment and brigade level. – *Arguably tripped with the Russian acknowledgement of significant mobilizations in the Southern Military District on December 1. The Kremlin confirmed military mobilizations in Opuk, Crimea; Many artillery elements of the 58th CAA are likely still located in Opuk after the April 2021 buildup.*

Partially Tripped:

1. Increased volume of video recordings capturing Russian hardware moving in western Russia towards Ukraine. – *We have observed an increase in video volume in November. Threshold: We still have not seen the same quantity of video as we saw in April, but we are steadily approaching that point.*
2. The Kremlin issues some form of political ultimatum to Kyiv or calls Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in for senior talks. – *Arguably Fyodor Lukyanov's November 24 article in which he almost says that if NATO does not give Putin a solid promise that Ukraine won't join NATO, there will be war similar to the Russia-Georgian war of 2008 trips this.*⁴ *There is still no formal Kremlin statement of an ultimatum or a call for Zelensky talks.*
3. More Russian deployments, mobilizations, or snap exercises at scale (units at the brigade/regiment/multiple battalion tactical groups from maneuver elements of the 1st Tank Army, and the 20th, 8th, and 41st CAAs).
 1. 20th CAA – Not tripped as of November 24 – *We may not see this occur in the open source if / when it occurs. Approximately 700 snipers, likely of the 20th CAA, began conducting reconnaissance and sniper exercises near the Ukrainian border on December 2.*⁵ *These exercises do not constitute mobilization at scale but are a significant indicator given the Kremlin's past effective use of Russian snipers in trench warfare in Donbas.*
 2. 1st Tank Army – *Likely partially tripped. Observed T-80U tanks likely of the 4th Tank Division IVO Voronez on November 10.*⁶ *Element echelon unclear.*
 3. 8th CAA – *Tripped with the DNR and LNR reserve mobilization on November 22 and announcement of large Southern Military District exercises on December 1.*⁷
 4. 41st CAA – *Likely partially tripped. Independent OSINT observers claim they observed more trucks of the 41st CAA deploy via rail from Siberia towards Yelnya on December 1.*⁸ *Previously observed elements of the 41st CAA are still at Yelnya as of December 1.*⁹ *The Russian Ministry of Defense additionally announced it formed*

a new Tank Support Fighting Vehicle (BMPT) company – possibly at Yelnya – on December 1.¹⁰

4. Mobilization of Russia's Black Sea naval elements. – *Arguably partially tripped on a small scale as of November 24. BSF naval aviation held an exercise of only 10 crews of Su-27 and Su-30 on November 24.¹¹ Missile ship Shuya of the Black Sea Fleet conducted an exercise on November 26 in response to the announcement of the USS Arleigh Burke's deployment to the Black Sea.¹² More than 500 marines of the Russian Black Sea Fleet began conducting exercises at unspecified Crimean training grounds on December 3.¹³ This mobilization does not constitute mobilization at scale but is significant as Black Sea Fleet naval infantry's first public battalion-sized mobilization since the crisis began in October 2021.*

Not Tripped:

1. Mobilization of Russia's Airborne Forces (VDV) *We may not see this occur in the open source if / when it occurs.*
2. Mobilization of Caspian Sea Fleet elements in the Black Sea near Ukraine. – *We may not see this occur in the open source if / when it occurs. Caspian Sea Fleet elements may still be in the Black Sea left over from the April 2021 buildup. Over 300 naval infantry of the Caspian Flotilla conducted exercises with Southern Military District (SMD) air support at the Adanak Training Ground in Dagestan on December 7.¹⁴ These exercises do not trip this indicator but are significant as Caspian Flotilla naval infantry's first roughly battalion-sized exercises since the crisis began in October 2021.*
3. Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA): The Kremlin escalates the migrant crisis in Belarus – *Likely in order to set conditions for deployment of Russian ground forces into Belarus.*
4. MDCOA: Kremlin deploys ground forces to Belarus. – *Not tripped as of December 6.*
5. MDCOA: Activations / mobilization / heightened readiness of the Russian Strategic Rocket Forces (nuclear weapons). – *We will very likely not see this in the open source if it occurs, but it would be an indicator that an operation is imminent or already underway. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has made public statements suggesting that the SRF are at heightened alert, however.¹⁵*

Information Domain Indicators

Tripped:

1. The Kremlin publicly defines red lines. – *Tripped on December 1 when Russian President Vladimir Putin stated he insists on "legal guarantees" that NATO will not expand further eastward towards Russia and called for formal negotiations with the US.¹⁶ Partially tripped when Russian President Vladimir Putin defined NATO deployments of "shock weapon systems" to Ukraine as one Kremlin "red line" on November 30.*
2. Belarus claims NATO is building military forces near Belarus. – *Belarusian MoD accused Poland of forming a formation that resembles "a shock group" near Belarus on November 11 and accused Lithuania and Latvia of building their own groups on November 23.¹⁷ Threshold: Russian media has not been emphasizing this information operation yet. If the Kremlin media bolsters it, then a Russian deployment to Belarus and the MDCOA is more likely.*
3. Russian claims that weapon shipments to Ukraine destabilize the situation. – *Tripped on November 22.¹⁸*

Partially Tripped:

1. MDCOA: Lukashenko requests Russian ground forces in Belarus. – *Partially tripped on November 29 with Lukashenko’s statement that Belarus will support Russia during any military escalation in Donbas. Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin additionally announced a joint military exercise with Russia on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border on an unspecified future date. Khrenin additionally announced Belarusian forces will begin major exercises on December 1.*¹⁹
2. Russian claims that Kyiv has de facto wholesale abandoned the Minsk Accords and Russia must therefore act to protect Donbas. – *Overall, not tripped, but some memes that buttress this have been.*
 1. Russian claims that “Zelensky cannot be reasoned with” or “Zelensky is abandoning Minsk II.” – *partially tripped for a long time. Threshold: This meme has been on medium-low burner since spring 2020 after Zelensky rejected the Kremlin’s call to implement the Steinmeier formula – one of the Kremlin’s preferred interpretations of Minsk II. A threshold for indicating whether moves into fully tripped would be an invigorated Kremlin media push around a centralized narrative that “Kyiv has completely disregarded Minsk II.” This push has not occurred, and this narrative has not left the backburner.*
 2. Russian claims that “Germany and France are de facto allowing Kyiv to get away with ignoring the Minsk Accords.” – *Tripped on November 21.*²⁰
3. Sustained or intensified Kremlin information operations claiming Ukraine is attacking or preparing to attack Donbas. – *Overall, not tripped, but some leading sub-indicators have been surfacing.*
 1. Kremlin claims Ukraine is attacking civilians. – *Not tripped as of December 6.*
 2. Kremlin claims Ukraine is amassing forces near Donbas. – *Tripped on December 1.*²¹
 3. Kremlin claims Ukraine is attacking “ethnic Russians” OR “Russian citizens.” – *Partially tripped as of November 29 when Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said Russia will continue its humanitarian assistance for “Russian citizens” in Donbas.*²² *The Kremlin also admitted a first batch of 100 Russian passport holders in Donbas to join Russian President Vladimir Putin’s ruling United Russia Party on November 30.*²³ *This development could support a Russian information operation about Ukrainian attacks against “Russian citizens in Donbas.” The Kremlin has not yet claimed Ukraine is attacking ethnic Russians or Russian citizens in Donbas as of November 30.*
 4. Kremlin claims UA forces seek to use are using TB2 or Javelins against civilians in Donbas. – *Not tripped as of December 6.*
 5. Kremlin warns about a “repeat of Srebrenica.” – *Partially tripped. The head of RT’s Russia and FSU desk resurfaced the Srebrenica meme on November 23, but it has not been repeated or gone mainstream as of November 24.*²⁴ *The last time the kremlin prominently mentioned the Srebrenica meme was in December 2019, when Putin warned that no amnesty for DNR and LNR fighters would result with a second Srebrenica.*²⁵
 6. Kremlin claims Ukraine is violating the demilitarized zones in Zolote, Stanitsa Luhanska, and Petrivske. – *Partially tripped as of November 28. The Luhansk Peoples Republic (LNR) People’s Militia claimed that Ukrainian Army forces entered the disengagement zone in Zolote, Luhansk, on November 28. The LNR claimed that it observed two soldiers of Ukraine’s 24th Mechanized Brigade inside former Ukrainian-held positions in the frontline village of Zolote.*²⁶ *Thresholds for this indicator include separatist claims of Ukrainians violations of the two other Petrivske and Stanitsa Luhanska demilitarized zones (not tripped yet), and large scale violations, such as, full battalion deployments to Zolote, Petrivske, and Stanitsa Luhanska. Russian proxy*

claims that two soldiers were observed in the Zolote demilitarized zone occupies a low place on the threshold scale for this narrative.

Not Tripped:

1. Intensified Kremlin information operations claiming NATO is deploying forces into Ukraine or creating "NATO bases" inside Ukraine. – *Not tripped yet.*
2. The Kremlin / Russian media stops denying a buildup around Ukraine – *Not tripped yet as of December 6.*
3. MDCOA: Titushki provocations in Kyiv, Odesa, Kharkiv, Mariupol, Sumy, or other significant Ukrainian cities. – *Not tripped.*

Kremlin Narratives / Memes of the Day

December 7

- TASS published an article on December 7 claiming that Zelensky may strip Donbas residents of their Ukrainian citizenship.²⁷ The article speculated that a potential Ukrainian policy change on dual citizenship regulations that Zelensky discussed on December 1 could enable Zelensky to deprive Donbas residents of opportunities to obtain Ukrainian citizenship.
- Russian media falsely claimed the OSCE observed Ukraine deploying tanks and howitzers to Donbas on December 7.²⁸ The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine observed 30 Ukrainian tanks and 17 Ukrainian howitzers at two railway stations in Ukrainian government-controlled areas of Donetsk and Luhansk on December 6.²⁹ The OSCE stated this hardware was in compliance with withdrawal lines.

December 5

- **Kremlin-sponsored media accused Ukrainian Armed Forces of deploying 17 tanks and two armored personnel carriers to three Ukrainian government-controlled settlements in eastern Ukraine on December 5.**³⁰ Russian media only specified that Ukraine deployed the T-64 tanks to Artyomivske, Donetsk Oblast. Russian media also claimed that Ukraine deployed the 20th Electronic Warfare Battalion to government-controlled eastern Ukraine to suppress Organization for Security and Cooperation Europe (OSCE) unmanned aerial monitoring in Zolote, Novoivanovka, and Orekhovo, Luhansk Oblast, on December 4.³¹ The OSCE did not report any Ukrainian deployments in the region between December 4-5.³²
- **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova accused NATO of endangering civilian aircraft over the Black Sea on December 5.**³³ Russia's Federal Air Transport Agency claimed that Russian airline Aeroflot flight from Tel Aviv to Moscow had to change directions over the Black Sea because of a NATO reconnaissance aircraft on December 3.³⁴ Zakharova denounced increased NATO activity near Russian borders.³⁵
- **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova responded to White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki's characterization of the Kremlin as a "provocateur" on December 5.**³⁶ Zakharova chastised Psaki and referenced the United States' military actions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Vietnam, Belgrade, Baghdad, the depositions of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi, and alleged US participation in color revolutions worldwide.

December 3

- **Kremlin-sponsored media manipulated Norwegian Foreign Minister Anniken Huitfeldt's November 30 interview to falsely suggest that Norway opposes any NATO force presence near any Russian border on December 3.**³⁷ Huitfeldt said that it is in Norway's security interests for Norwegian vessels to accompany NATO ships and planes when NATO conducts exercises near Russia's northern sea border with Norway.³⁸ Russian media falsely said Norway condemned all NATO operations along Russian borders.

December 2

- **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova decried the NATO foreign ministerial in Riga on December 2.**³⁹ Zakharova said on December 2 that the Kremlin has defined Ukraine's accession to NATO as a long-term "red line." Zakharov stated that NATO's increased cooperation with Ukraine is the "de facto beginning of NATO's assimilation of [Ukraine's] military infrastructure" to support NATO military operations against Russia. Zakharova reiterated that NATO must halt its eastward expansion to resolve the current situation.
- **Kremlin-sponsored media conducted a coordinated information campaign stating that military action is "highly likely" in Donbas and Crimea following Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's speech to the Ukrainian Parliament on December 1.**⁴⁰ Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said that the "Kyiv regime is determined to use all opportunities, including force, to encroach on [Crimea]," on December 2.⁴¹ Peskov stated that the likelihood of Ukrainian military activity in Donbas is "still high."⁴² Kremlin media used to target Western audiences is supporting this meme.⁴³ A centralized intensified Kremlin information operation claiming Ukraine will attack Donbas or Crimea would indicate that Russian military operations in Donbas are likely imminent. The Kremlin has not elevated this meme to reach that threshold as of December 2.
- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on December 1 that Russia knew about a claimed Ukrainian deployment of 125,000 troops near Donbas for a while.**⁴⁴ Lavrov's December 2 statement buttresses a meme about a claimed Ukrainian deployment of 125,000 troops to Donbas that first appeared in the Russian information space on December 1.⁴⁵ Lavrov stated that Ukraine accumulated troops under the guise of seasonal troop rotation. Lavrov accused the West of concealing the Ukrainian troop movements.

December 1

- **Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said that Ukraine undermined the Minsk Accords by deploying 125,000 troops to Donbas on December 1.**⁴⁶ Zakharova stated that NATO states are preparing to send military personnel to Ukraine and claimed that London intends to send 600 British servicemen to the "Ukrainian civil war." Zakharova said Kyiv is using a bill passed in August to forcefully return Donbas to Ukraine and exit the Minsk Accords. Zakharova said Western media created mass "hysteria" about potential Russian invasion in a bid to cover Ukrainian military developments in the east.

November 30

- **Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) issued a rebuttal to NATO's statement that NATO poses no threat to Russia on November 30.**⁴⁷ The MFA said NATO threatens Russia because the alliance seeks to expand in Russia's "eastern flank," is "uncontrollably" expanding in Europe, and breaches treaties. The MFA said Russia is acting in a "purely defensive nature" against NATO purposeful provocations executed via "large-scale" and "unplanned" exercises in the Black Sea. The Kremlin will increase information pressure against NATO in tandem with Russia's military buildup against Ukraine in winter 2021-2022.

- **Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the United States “surrounded” Russia with its military bases during a November 30 speech.**⁴⁸ Lavrov said Russia observes daily Western troop and equipment deployments near Russia under the guise of being in response to Russian military exercises. Lavrov said NATO lied for 30 years about not expanding towards Russian borders. Lavrov said that the United States intervenes in other states’ domestic affairs under the guise of “spreading democracy,” refuses international cooperation, and disregards their obligations in the United Nations.

November 29

- **Kremlin-sponsored media mischaracterized an annual exercise authorization bill to claim Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky is violating the Minsk Accords by allowing foreign troops to participate in training exercises in Ukraine in 2022.**⁴⁹ Zelensky registered an annually recurring bill to authorize foreign military deployments to Ukraine for training exercises to Ukraine’s Parliament on November 29.⁵⁰ Russian media falsely framed Zelensky’s bill as Ukrainian preparations to attack Donbas.⁵¹

November 28

- Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov accused “Anglo-Saxon media” of driving false “hysteria” about a Russian attack against Ukraine on November 28. Peskov said, “This hysteria, which is now being whipped up in the Anglo-Saxon media, in the Ukrainian media and is supported by Ukrainian politicians headed by the head of state – we consider it absolutely unacceptable.”⁵² Peskov said that accusations against Russia may be an attempt for Ukraine to conduct a military offensive against Donbas: “...we have already said that this escalation may be an attempt to hide [Ukraine's] own preparations for a military solution to the Donbas problem.”⁵³
- The Luhansk Peoples Republic (LNR) People’s Militia claimed that Ukrainian Army forces entered the disengagement zone in Zolote, Luhansk, on November 28. The LNR claimed that it observed two soldiers of Ukraine’s 24th Mechanized Brigade inside former Ukrainian-held positions in the frontline village of Zolote.⁵⁴ Zelensky ordered Ukrainian forces to withdraw from Zolote in November 2019 as part of an experimental disengagement.⁵⁵ Ukrainian disengagement from Zolote (and two other frontline positions at Stanitsa Luhanska and Petrivske) was very likely a Kremlin condition for the December 2019 Normandy Format talk in Paris, France. Kremlin and Kremlin proxies have not claimed Ukrainian violations of Stanitsa Luhanska and Petrivske demilitarized zones as of November 28.

November 27

- Russian propaganda is increasingly targeting the US and “US propaganda” about a Russian invasion in Ukraine. Russian SVR Director Sergey Naryshkin said the United States is trying to inflame the conflict in Donbas by spreading false propaganda alleging a planned Russian invasion of Ukraine on November 27.⁵⁶ “The [Americans’] goal is to try to push the poorly-controlled Kyiv authorities to rekindle the conflict... with renewed vigor.” Naryshkin continued to deny any Russian invasion plans. A central Russian information operation is pushing this meme. Naryshkin made this statement on Rossiya 1 (primetime tv news) and mainstream Kremlin outlets (*Sputnik*, *Izvestia*, *RIA Novosti*, *TASS*, and others) are recirculating it. This is likely the key narrative of the weekend for the Russian domestic information space. Conditioning Russian citizens to perceive all reports of a Russian invasion as being American propaganda is likely a key Kremlin information objective for the weekend of November 27-28.

November 26

- Russia's representative to the OSCE Alexander Lukashevich accused Kyiv of conducting a disinformation operation about a Russian offensive to justify NATO's expansion in Ukraine and near Russian borders on November 26. Lukashevich said Kyiv is spreading falsehoods about Russian aggression to "justify the current build-up of NATO's potential and activity near the Russian borders, to create the preconditions for the enhanced military development of the territory of Ukraine by the alliance, and finally to justify Kyiv's sabotage of the Minsk agreements."⁵⁷

November 25

- Russian Foreign Ministry (MFA) Spokesperson Maria Zakharova focused on framing Kyiv as an increasing aggressor in Donbas at the MFA briefing on November 25. She said the Ukrainian government is fueling the situation in Donbas and "pushing for military (force) resolution of the conflict inside of Ukraine," as Ukrainian government feels it can do so unpunished.⁵⁸ Zakharova also talked about Ukraine increasingly using prohibited weapon systems in Donbas.
- Russian representative to the OSCE Alexander Lukashevich accused Ukraine of attacking freedom of speech in Ukraine on November 25. Lukashevich cited the recent staff firings at the Kyiv Post and Zelensky's ban of pro-Russian opposition media outlets in February 2021.⁵⁹ This meme can support efforts to reinforce the narrative that Kyiv is targeting Russian entities.

November 24:

- Shoigu says Russia's nuclear capabilities and armed forces need to maintain combat readiness in light of the increased activity of NATO countries near Russia's borders.⁶⁰
- Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov says that Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev's narrative on November 23 about Ukraine potentially facing a migration crisis was "well-reasoned."⁶¹
- Reserve Colonel Oleg Zhdanov said, "the United States is deliberately escalating tension around the situation on the Russian-Ukrainian border."⁶²
- Fyodor Lukyanov – a prominent Kremlin foreign policy thinker – published an article in which he almost says that if NATO does not give Putin a solid promise that Ukraine will not join NATO, there will be war similar to the Russia-Georgian war of 2008.⁶³

November 23:

- Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, "the lack of progress in the implementation of the Minsk agreements is a significant irritant and trigger that leads to the level of tension in Europe as a whole," on November 23.⁶⁴
- Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev stated that Ukraine might face a refugee crisis. He blamed the West for de facto establishing a protectorate in Ukraine, destroying Ukraine's economy, and stated that "any moment the situation [in Ukraine] can explode and millions of refugees will run to seek shelter in other places."⁶⁵
- Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu stated that the US Global Thunder 22 exercises included 10 strategic nuclear bombers postured against Russia.⁶⁶ The Pentagon responded on November 24 and said, "These missions were announced publicly at the time, and closely planned with (Strategic Command), (European Command), allies and partners to ensure maximum training and integration opportunities as well as compliance with all national and international requirements and protocols."
- Chairman of the State Duma Defense Committee Andrei Kartapolov announced the risk of a repeat of the Afghan scenario in Ukraine. Kartapolov said "All US efforts to 'help' Ukraine are leading it to an abyss." Kartapolov urged people to recall "how the American adventure in Afghanistan ended."⁶⁷

November 22:

- Russian SVR press bureau issues a statement on how Washington is spreading false information about Russian preparations for an attack against Ukraine. “The provocative policy of the United States and the European Union, which deliberately strengthens Kyiv’s sense of permissiveness and impunity, is of extreme concern. We observed a similar situation in Georgia on the eve of the 2008 events.”⁶⁸

Updates on Key States’ Activities

Russia

Russia’s Western Military District (WMD) may be building a new base near Ukraine or Belarus. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that unspecified platoon commanders of the WMD began conducting training exercises at the WMD’s “31st Training Ground” on December 7.⁶⁹ It is unclear where the 31st Training Ground is located or how long it has existed. The Russian Ministry of Defense publicly mentioned the 31st Training Ground for the first time on November 24, 2021, and announced its intent to build 72 buildings and structures on the grounds.⁷⁰ The “31st Training Ground” could be a new Russian base near Ukraine or Belarus to support Russian military activities in either country, though we have no evidence for that hypothesis.

Two large landing ships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet loaded Black Sea Fleet naval infantry for amphibious assault exercises at the Opuk Training Ground in Crimea on December 7.⁷¹ The *Caesar Kunikov* and *Novocherkassk* large landing ships of the Black Sea fleet onboarded an unspecified number of naval infantry at an unspecified location for future exercises at Opuk on an unspecified future date.

Over 300 naval infantry of the Caspian Flotilla conducted exercises with Southern Military District (SMD) air support at the Adanak Training Ground in Dagestan on December 7.⁷² Caspian Flotilla naval infantry defended a beach from simulated amphibious assault with Mi-28 helicopter air support from the SMD’s 4th Air and Air Defense Army. This was the first roughly battalion-sized Caspian Flotilla naval infantry exercise since the Russian military buildup near Ukraine resumed in October 2021.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov stated that NATO military deployments to Ukraine would “force” Russia to protect its interests on December 6.⁷³ Peskov condemned the US and NATO not recognizing Russia’s “red lines” and suggested Russia will act unless the West respects Kremlin red lines.

Over 300 senior officers of the Southern Military District (SMD) including regimental commanders began training for multi-domain operations with missile and air strikes on December 6.⁷⁴ SMD Commander Alexander Dvornikov is presiding over videoconference training with SMD commanders down to the regimental level. The training includes conducting complex multi-domain operations to conduct air and missile strikes in multiple operational directions.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Russia “must force” Ukraine to work within the Minsk Accords framework on December 5.⁷⁵ Lavrov stated that Ukraine will not implement any agreements on its own. Lavrov added that Berlin and Paris are slacking on their commitments to hold Ukraine accountable under the Normandy Format.⁷⁶

The Kremlin granted United Russia Party membership to Luhansk People's Republic leader Leonid Pasechnik and Donetsk People's Republic leader Denis Pushilin on November 30 and December 4, respectively.⁷⁷ The Kremlin will likely use Pushilin and Pasechnik's now-official position in the Kremlin's ruling party to advance Russian information operations about protecting "Russian citizens" in Donbas.

More than 500 marines of the Russian Black Sea Fleet began conducting military exercises in unspecified Crimean training grounds on December 3.⁷⁸ Black Sea Fleet naval infantry practiced defending equipment transport and neutralizing enemy reconnaissance groups while deploying to Crimean training grounds. This mobilization does not constitute mobilization at scale but is significant as Black Sea Fleet naval infantry's first public battalion-sized mobilization since the crisis began in October 2021.

Over Russian 700 servicemen, likely of the 20th Combined Arms Army, began conducting tactical sniper and reconnaissance exercises in Voronezh, Belgorod, Bryansk and Smolensk, on December 2.⁷⁹ The exercises emphasize reconnaissance, sniper, and counter-sniper tasks. Embedded regular Russian snipers and Russian-trained proxy militia snipers are a leading cause of Ukrainian casualties in Donbas.

The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced on December 2 that it arrested an alleged Ukrainian Military Intelligence (GUR) operative that Ukrainian officials instructed to conduct a "terrorist attack" with improved explosive devices on Russian soil.⁸⁰ Intensified Russian information operations about alleged Ukrainian attacks against Russian soil would indicate an effort to set information conditions to support Russian military operations against Ukraine. The Kremlin has not pushed this narrative as of December 3.

Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on December 3 that Russia's 8th Combined Arms Army began new operational and combat training exercises and preparing forward artillery in occupied Donbas on December 1.⁸¹ The GUR claims these exercises seek to raise the combat readiness of units of the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR). The GUR claims that Russian-controlled forces in the DNR and LNR are rotating units to forward positions and preparing indirect fire assets to attack Ukrainian positions. The DNR and LNR have not yet mobilized at scale as of December 3.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called on the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Ministerial Council to formulate "long-term, legally binding security guarantees" against NATO expansion on December 2.⁸² Lavrov repeated Russian President Vladimir Putin's "red lines" from December 1 speech.⁸³ Lavrov said that Russia will make concrete proposals soon counting on Western "serious consideration, in essence and without excuses." Lavrov demanded that OSCE participate in regulating conflicts, specifically by sending a harsh signal to Kyiv to implement the Minsk Agreements. Lavrov said the Ukrainian crisis cannot be resolved without direct dialogue between Ukraine and the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (DNR and LNR), and by granting the proxies special status in Ukraine's constitution. The Kremlin likely seeks to permanently integrate DNR and LNR into Ukraine as Russian-controlled proxies.⁸⁴

Russian President Vladimir Putin clearly articulated his red lines on halting NATO's eastern expansion for the first time on December 1. Putin stated he insists on

“legal guarantees” that NATO will not expand further eastward towards Russia at a ceremony to present foreign ambassadors their credentials on December 1.⁸⁵ Putin also referenced his previous November 18 session with Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in which Putin claimed the West is not respecting Russian red lines.⁸⁶ Putin’s statement was exceptionally clear and unusual; Putin does not normally articulate Russian policy objectives so clearly in open settings. Putin seeks impose a revisionist world order in which states in Russia’s claimed sphere of influence have truncated sovereignty. The Kremlin may decide to conduct military operations against Ukraine if Western leaders and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky reject these demands.

The Permanent Council of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) expressed “great concern” over NATO’s military activity near Russian borders on December 1.⁸⁷ The Kremlin-dominated CSTO accused NATO of violating the 1936 Montreux Convention which forbids the transit of non-Black Sea states’ warships with large military equipment. The CSTO is likely establishing information conditions about NATO’s disregard of Russian borders across former Soviet states to support Russian President Vladimir Putin’s stated red lines.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia will “harshly react” to any maneuvers on Russia’s western borders on December 1.⁸⁸ Lavrov encouraged the West to consider Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko’s November 30 statement of his openness to host Russian nuclear missiles as a warning.⁸⁹ Lavrov’s statement indicates an increased likelihood of a permanent Russian military deployment to Belarus. Lavrov said NATO’s effort to add Ukraine to its “anti-Russia” orbit “severely complicates” the situation in Donbas. Lavrov accused NATO of supplying Ukraine with weapons illegal under the Minsk Accords and inciting land, air, and sea-based provocations with the United States near Russian borders. Lavrov emphasized Russia’s readiness to suppress diplomatic initiatives in the United Nations that are beneficial to the West.

The Russian Ministry of Defense on December 1 acknowledged large military movements in the Southern Military District (SMD) for the first time since the crisis began. The Russian Ministry of Defense stated that over 10,000 SMD personnel organized in battalion tactical groups (BTG) began deploying unspecified training grounds in the SMD for exercises.⁹⁰ Multiple BTGs of the Russian 58th CAA and 8th CAA are likely mobilized in Crimea and Rostov, respectively.⁹¹ This is the first time the Kremlin acknowledged large SMD mobilization since the Russian buildup against Ukraine began in October 2021. This acknowledgement is likely intended as a signal to Ukraine and NATO given Putin’s simultaneous articulation of a red lines for the West on NATO expansion on December 1.⁹²

The Critical Intelligence Team (CIT) OSINT group claims it spotted more elements of the Russian 41st CAA deploying from Siberia to western Russia on December 1.⁹³ CIT claims it found video depicting trucks of the Tuva-based 55th Motorize Rifle Brigade deploying westward via rail. CIT argues these deployments are likely to Yelnya where other elements of the 41st CAA are deployed near the border with Belarus.⁹⁴

Russian President Vladimir Putin defined NATO deployments of “shock weapon systems” to Ukraine as one Kremlin “red line” on November 30.⁹⁵ Putin said if Ukraine receives cruise and hypersonic missiles, Russia will respond in minutes. Putin stated that “there are repeated threats of new [Ukrainian] military formations” near the LNR and DNR and reiterated Russia’s concern over NATO strategic aviation in the Black Sea. Putin had

not previously publicly defined any Kremlin red line in Ukraine. Putin may articulate more red lines as Russia increases military pressure against Ukraine over winter 2021-2022.

The Kremlin officially initiated a first batch of 100 Donbas residents into Russian President Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia party on November 30.⁹⁶ Russian President Vladimir Putin's ruling United Russia Party announced on November 2 that Russian passport-holders in Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics (LNR and DNR) will be able to join the party.⁹⁷ The Kremlin will likely increasingly leverage information operations claiming to defend Russians in Donbas.

Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova said Russia will continue its humanitarian assistance for "Russian citizens" in Donbas on November 29.⁹⁸ Zakharova accused the European Union of considering to send military equipment to Ukraine instead of humanitarian aid to Donbas. The Kremlin will likely intensify military shipments to Donbas falsely presented as "humanitarian aid convoys" in winter 2021-2022.

Peskov stated on November 28 that the Kremlin hopes Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden will have a video conference before the end of 2021. Peskov stated that there is no exact date for such a call.⁹⁹

Military equipment previously parked in Crimea since April 2021 is on the move to an unknown location as of November 27. Previously visible Russian military equipment at the Opuk Training Ground in Crimea disappeared from satellite monitoring visibility on November 26-27, indicating redeployment elsewhere.¹⁰⁰ Motorized rifle and artillery elements, many from the 58th CAA, deployed to Opuk in April 2021.¹⁰¹ It is unclear where the equipment is going as of November 29.

The Kremlin's political objectives for Donbas likely have not changed as of November 26. Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova reiterated the Kremlin's historically consistent political objectives for a settlement in Donbas on November 26.¹⁰² Zakharova stated, "there is no alternative to an exclusively peaceful settlement, a direct dialogue between Kyiv, Donetsk and Lugansk as parties to the conflict, and a strict sequence of steps, according to which the restoration of control of the Ukrainian authorities over the border with Russia takes the last place after the granting of a special status to Donbas, the implementation of an amnesty, and the lifting of the economic blockade. And holding local elections." Zakharova said the "main negotiating format" is the Trilateral Contact Group (Kyiv, OSCE, and LNR/DNR), and that the Normandy Format's purpose is to monitor the implementation of the Minsk Accords. She also condemned the foreign ministries of Germany and France for "groundlessly" accusing Russia of refusing to participate in the Normandy Format on November 25.

Russia sent a "humanitarian aid" convoy to the Donetsk People's Republic on November 25. The convoy arrived in the DNR on November 25 and is Russia's 104th so-called humanitarian convoy to Donbas to date.¹⁰³ Russia's Emergency Situations Ministry claimed the convoy carried more than 92 tons of medicine and medical equipment.¹⁰⁴ This convoy likely carried weapons and ammunition given documented past Russian weapon shipments to Donbas under the guise of "humanitarian aid convoys."

Russian authorities increased border security in Voronezh Oblast on November 22. The Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) announced on November 22 that Russian

border guards deployed 24-hour border patrols and stricter checkpoints on a 56-kilometer stretch between Boguchar and Kantemirovka in Voronezh Oblast, Russia, on the Russian border with Ukraine.¹⁰⁵ Russia's 3rd Motorized Rifle Division is based in Boguchar. This increased border security supports Russian efforts to conceal Russian deployments closer to Ukraine in Voronezh.

Russian proxy Activity

Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) leader Denis Pushilin said the DNR may unify with the Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) in the future and during a December 5 interview.¹⁰⁶ Pushilin said the DNR and LNR cannot unify at this time because the unification would allow Ukraine to undermine the Minsk Accords. Pushilin stated that Ukrainian government-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk are awaiting the "arrival of the Russian world" and implied that DNR seeks to occupy the entire Donetsk Oblast.¹⁰⁷ Pushilin also reiterated Kremlin statements about Ukrainian militarization and deployments to Donbas.¹⁰⁸ Pushilin announced that over 350,000 DNR residents received Russian passports.¹⁰⁹

Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) leader Denis Pushilin said on November 30 that he wants to hold a referendum in the DNR, but did not specify on what issues.¹¹⁰ Pushilin said the DNR proposed to the members of the United Nations Security Council – likely Russia – to hold a referendum in the DNR in a November 30 interview. Pushilin likely seeks to hold a referendum to unify the DNR with Russia. The DNR has long sought full integration with Russia – an objective the Kremlin historically has not supported. The Kremlin likely seeks to reintegrate the DNR and LNR into Ukraine as Russian-controlled proxies.¹¹¹ The Kremlin could leverage Pushilin's statements about a referendum to advance Russia's own information operations to support a Russian military operation in Donbas, however.

United Kingdom

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2.¹¹² Truss restated the UK's support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and urged the Kremlin to deescalate.¹¹³ Lavrov emphasized that the UK's provocative rhetoric undermines efforts to restore constructive dialogue on Ukraine.¹¹⁴

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss met with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2.¹¹⁵ The ministers exchanged views on cooperation between Ukraine and the UK to strengthen security in the Black Sea region. They agreed on the need to unite European states to prevent the launch of Nord Stream 2.

The UK announced it established a security force assistance brigade and a NATO holding area in Germany on November 25. The brigade has tanks and drone elements.¹¹⁶ UK Lieutenant General Ralph Wooddisse stated, "we are putting a substantial number of armored vehicles forward in order to be able to move more quickly should they be required anywhere on the continental [European] landmass."¹¹⁷ This is a reversal of the UK's 2020 permanent force presence withdrawal from Germany in late 2020.¹¹⁸

The United Kingdom and Ukraine signed a 1.7-billion pound loan agreement for the development of the Ukrainian navy on November 12. The deal stipulates that the UK will transfer two decommissioned UK Royal Navy minehunters to Ukraine, produce 8 missile ships, joint production of eight missile ships, the delivery of and retrofit of weapons systems to existing Ukrainian vessels, the production of a Ukrainian frigate, and technical support for building Ukrainian naval infrastructure.¹¹⁹

United States

US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin held a videoconference on Ukraine on December 7. The Kremlin readout accused Ukraine of attempting to completely dismantle the Minsk Accords and shirk its commitments from Normandy Format meetings.¹²⁰ Putin stated that NATO seeks to “conquer Ukrainian territory” and deploy military forces near Russian borders. Putin reiterated his demand to obtain “legally fixed guarantees excluding the expansion of NATO in the eastern direction and the deployment of offensive strike weapons systems in the states adjacent to Russia.” The Kremlin readout stated that the presidents agreed to undertake “substantive consultations” on these issues. Biden stated that the US and its allies would respond with “strong economic and other measures” in the event of a military escalation against Ukraine.¹²¹ Biden reiterated his support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and called for de-escalation and a return to diplomacy. Biden spoke with French, German, Italian, and British leaders to brief them on his call with Putin.¹²²

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken called Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on December 6.¹²³ Zelensky and Blinken discussed their respective positions ahead of US President Joe Biden’s call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 7. Zelensky and Blinken agreed on the importance of coordinating sanctions pressure against Russia, the full restoration of Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and the importance of strengthening security cooperation.

US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley participated in a virtual meeting with the NATO Military Committee to discuss “significant security developments across Europe” on December 6.¹²⁴

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba discussed implementing deterrence measures against Russia on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2. Blinken and Kuleba discussed the implementation of deterrence measures against Russia including enhanced security and defense cooperation, the preparation of “tough” economic sanctions in the event of intensified Russian aggression, and political and diplomatic pressure against Russia.¹²⁵ Blinken reiterated US commitments to Ukraine’s independence and territorial integrity and stressed the full implementation of the Minsk Accords.¹²⁶

US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden, on December 2. Blinken reiterated US calls for Russia to demobilize forces near Ukraine and adhere to the Minsk Accords and the ceasefire in Donbas. Blinken stated the United States and its allies are prepared to impose “significant costs” against Russia if it escalates militarily.¹²⁷ Lavrov warned that the United States’ continued ignoring of Russia’s “concerns” will result in “most serious consequences and will force [Russia] to take retaliatory measures to straighten the military-strategic balance.”¹²⁸ Lavrov restated desire to establish a US-Russia dialogue in

accordance with the agreements that Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden reached at the June 2021 Geneva summit.

US Sixth Fleet announced that the USS Arleigh Burke guided missile destroyer began deploying to the Black Sea “to operate with NATO allies and partners in the region” on November 25.¹²⁹ Missile ship “Shuya” of the Black Sea Fleet conducted an exercise in response to the announcement of Arleigh Burke’s deployment.¹³⁰

Ukraine’s navy received two refurbished former US Coast Guard patrol boats on November 23.¹³¹

Chief of the Russian General Staff Valery Gerasimov and US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley had a phone call on November 23. TASS reports that Russian Ministry of Defense stated they “discussed topical issues of international security.”¹³² The Joint Chiefs of Staff readout states they discussed “several security-related issues of concern.” This was likely on Ukraine given Milley had a phone call with Ukrainian Commander of Chief of the Ukrainian Armed Forces Valery Zaluzhny on November 22.¹³³

The Biden Administration is reportedly considering sending military advisors and weapons to Ukraine. CNN reported on November 22 that the Biden Administration is considering sending Ukraine US military advisers and weapons (Javelins, stingers, Mi-17 helicopters, and mortars).¹³⁴

The US imposed new sanctions against Nord Stream 2 on November 22. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that the Department of State submitted to Congress a list with two vessels and one Russia-linked entity involved in the pipeline to be sanctioned.¹³⁵

Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III met with Ukrainian Defense Ministry Oleksii Reznikov in Washington on November 18. The ministers agreed to work closely together to advance the shared priorities outlined in the U.S.-Ukraine Strategic Defense Framework signed on August 31.¹³⁶ Austin stated interest in deepening cooperation in Black Sea security, cyber defense, and intelligence sharing.

Canada

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov met with Canadian Chief of the Defense Staff Wayne Eyre and called Canadian National Defense Minister Anita Anand on December 3.¹³⁷ Eyre met with Reznikov during his official working visit to Kyiv aimed at developing cooperation between Ukraine and Canada’s armed forces. Both parties discussed bilateral defense cooperation in light of Russian security threats

France and Germany

French officials issued forceful statements against a Russian offensive in Ukraine in November. Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov attended the Russian-French Security Cooperation Council meeting with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Defense Minister Florence Parly in Paris, France, on November 12.¹³⁸ The Russian and French ministers reiterated the necessity of compliance with the Minsk Agreements. The ministers discussed nuclear non-proliferation and arms control, prevention of an arms race in outer space, and Russia-EU and Russia-NATO

relations, and other topics. Le Drian and Parly warned the Kremlin of “serious consequences related to any new harm to Ukraine’s territorial integrity” in a joint French ministers’ statement.¹³⁹ Le Drian gave an interview on November 21 in which he reiterated that “Any [Russian] violation of the [Ukrainian] border, any intrusion would lead to extremely grave consequences.”¹⁴⁰

Germany temporarily suspended Nord Stream 2’s certification on November 16.

Germany’s energy regulator reportedly suspended the process because a Swiss-based consortium behind Nord Stream 2 reportedly first needed to form a German subsidiary company under German law to secure an operating license.¹⁴¹ The German energy regulator said it would not continue its approval process until the Nord Stream 2 company, which is registered in Switzerland, transfers its main assets and staffing budget to its German subsidiary.¹⁴²

French, German, and Ukrainian foreign ministers had a working meeting in Brussels on November 15. France and Germany issued joint statement in support of Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.¹⁴³ France and Germany called on Ukraine to implement the Minsk Accords and expressed regret that Lavrov has refused to meet at the ministerial level for a Normandy Format meeting.

NATO activity

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that Russia “no right to interfere” in Ukraine’s sovereign decision to pursue NATO membership at the Riga NATO ministerial on November 30.¹⁴⁴ Stoltenberg emphasized Ukraine is a sovereign state and that the Kremlin has no right to dictate Ukraine’s policies. Stoltenberg said “any future Russian aggression against Ukraine would come at high price,” and called on Russia to de-escalate under threat of “serious political and economic consequences.”

Eastern and Central European Allies

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba met Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis on the sidelines of the OSCE ministerial in Stockholm, Sweden on December 3.¹⁴⁵ Kuleba and Landsbergis discussed Russian military deployments near Ukraine and Belarus’ migrant trafficking against Lithuania and Poland. Landsbergis reiterated Lithuania’s readiness to continue supporting Ukraine’s EU and NATO accession.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda, and Polish President Andrzej Duda issued a joint statement reaffirming support for Ukraine’s EU and NATO accession on December 2.¹⁴⁶ Nausėda and Duda reiterated Lithuania’s and Poland’s support for Ukraine joining the EU and NATO. The statement also asserts that Belarus presents hybrid threats that impact all of European security and reiterated Polish and Lithuanian readiness to jointly oppose Russia’s Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba met with Estonian Foreign Minister Eva-Maria Liimets on the sidelines of the NATO Ministerial Meeting in Riga, Latvia on December 1. Kuleba informed Liimets of the Russian military deployments near Ukraine and Liimets agreed to jointly oppose Russian aggression in the Baltic-Black Sea region.¹⁴⁷ Liimets reiterated Estonia’s support for admitting Ukraine into the EU and NATO.

Kuleba and Liimets also discussed further joint defense cooperation and countering hybrid threats.

The defense ministers of the Bucharest Nine (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) issued a statement calling for the strengthening of NATO's eastern flank "from the Baltic to Black Sea" on November 25.¹⁴⁸ They also said it was necessary to work on a new defense strategy within NATO. US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks addressed the allies virtually and "affirmed the U.S. commitment to NATO's eastern flank and commented on recent Russian activity around Ukraine, the migrant crisis on the Belarusian-EU border, and strategic competition with the Peoples' Republic of China."¹⁴⁹ Hicks also underscored that EU defense initiatives should remain coherent, mutually reinforcing, interoperable with, and available to NATO.

Ukrainian Political Activity

Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) reported on December 7 that Russia is reinforcing the front line in Donbas with an unspecified number of 122-mm self-propelled artillery, tanks, and infantry fighting vehicles.¹⁵⁰ GUR also stated that Russian forces increased proxy sniper readiness through increased training.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov called on Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom to provide Ukraine with additional military support in an interview published on December 5.¹⁵¹ Reznikov stated Ukraine needs Canadian, US, and UK assistance in securing anti-aircraft missiles, modern warplanes, navy vessels, and electronic jamming equipment. Reznikov also suggested that Canada should increase its training mission in Yavoriv, Ukraine, from 50 to 500 instructors.¹⁵² Reznikov said Canada should deploy more Canadian trainers to Kharkiv, Mariupol, Kramatorsk, Odesa, and Zminiy Island to deter a Russian military action. Canadian Chief of Defense Staff Wayne Eyre had said that Canada will not increase its military presence in Ukraine on December 2.¹⁵³

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov stated Russia may conduct a large-scale escalation at the end of January during an address to the Ukrainian parliament on December 3.¹⁵⁴ Reznikov said Russia has accumulated approximately 94,300 troops near Ukraine and in Donbas and Crimea. Reznikov stated that Russia deployed over 50 battalion tactical groups (BTG) to the Ukrainian border between April and September.¹⁵⁵ Reznikov said that Russia has 41 BTGs at a constant state of readiness around Ukraine, 33 on a permanent basis and eight "additionally transferred to Crimea" and implied that Russia left military equipment at Ukraine's borders after some BTGs returned to their permanent positions earlier in the year.¹⁵⁶ Reznikov noted that Russia began its winter training season near Ukraine in Bryansk and Smolensk regions, activated reconnaissance assets, established signals, and camouflaged the troops throughout the week of November 21-28.¹⁵⁷ Reznikov said if two Russian Baltic Fleet landing ships redeploy from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, Russia will have nine vessels with a capacity to transport 3,000 servicemen and up to 250 armored combat vehicles to the region. Reznikov said Kyiv and Ukrainian partners are looking for political ways to frame a potential invasion as detrimental and unacceptable to Russia.¹⁵⁸ Ukraine likely seeks to leverage Russia's dependence on the European gas market and the threat of further sanctions to prevent an invasion. Reznikov announced that Ukraine and the UK are building two naval bases in Ochakovo, Mykolaiv, and Berdyansk, Zaporizhia.¹⁵⁹ Reznikov said that Ukraine's main priority is establishing a Western-supported anti-missile program by 2032 – a goal that will likely prompt further Russian military campaigns.¹⁶⁰

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky and Canadian President Justin Trudeau had a phone call on Russian threats to Ukraine on December 2.¹⁶¹ Zelensky and Trudeau discussed Russian security threats to Ukraine and agreed on the need to increase economic, political and sanctions pressure against Russia in the event of an escalation against Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky restated Kyiv's desire to implement Ukraine's Association Agreement with the European Union and stated his readiness to talk to Russia at an address to the Ukrainian parliament on December 1.¹⁶² Zelensky reiterated that Kyiv aims to implement the European Union Association Agreement and claimed that Ukraine has fulfilled 60 percent of the agreement's requirements.¹⁶³ Zelensky stated that negotiating with Russia is necessary to end the war in Donbas. The Kremlin will likely intensify military pressure against Ukraine and NATO over the next several weeks to curtail Kyiv's efforts to join Western structures.

Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate claimed on November 30 that Russia sent the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) more ammunition, lubricants, military equipment, UAVs, and electronic warfare assets in the month of November.¹⁶⁴ This report, if accurate, indicates a growing Russian command and control (C2) development activity in occupied Donbas that could support Russian combat operations in Ukraine.

The Ukrainian Ministry of Defense on November 29 claimed that Russia deployed an unspecified "group of Russian military personnel" to the Donetsk People's Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People's Republic (LNR) to strengthen DNR and LNR reconnaissance, sabotage, and sapper units sometime during the week of November 21 – 28.¹⁶⁵ Ukraine's Defense ministry did not provide details on the size or organization of this Russian military "group." This report, if accurate, indicates a growing Russian command and control (C2) development activity in occupied Donbas that could support Russian combat operations in Ukraine.

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba gave a speech articulating Ukraine's strategy to deter a Russian invasion on November 29. Kuleba said Ukraine seeks to deter and demotivate Russia from conducting further military activities against Ukraine.¹⁶⁶ He said Ukraine proposed to its international partners a package of measures consisting of three main points: political containment of Russia, economic deterrence from new sanctions tied to a new Russian offensive, and enhancing Ukraine's defensive capabilities through international defense cooperation.

Ukrainian President Zelensky claimed that Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov (a former Party of Regions funder, Viktor Yanukovich partner, and alleged Donetsk mafia boss) of planning a coup in tandem with Russian actors on December 1 or 2 in a carefully orchestrated press conference on November 26. Zelensky stated that Ukrainian intelligence received information about a planned coup against Zelensky's government on December 1 or 2. Zelensky stated that "representatives of Russia" along with Ukrainian oligarch Rinat Akhmetov were planning the coup. Zelensky suggested that the Russian coup attempt may be enlisting Akhmetov's participation without Akhmetov's knowledge.¹⁶⁷ Zelensky did not present any evidence of these claims. Zelensky also stated that Ukraine has received assurances from allies - the United States, Canada, UK, the EU, and Turkey - that they will support Ukraine in the event of an escalation.¹⁶⁸

Ukrainian defense officials continue to issue contradictory statements about a Russian offensive as of November 25. Secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council Oleksiy Danilov contradicted Ukrainian Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) Chief Kirill Budanov's claims of a Russian offensive around mid-January on November 25.¹⁶⁹ Danilov stated "we do not see the threats that Mr. Budanov is talking about for January 15." Danilov characterized Russian threats against Ukraine as not new, and that Ukraine is ready to respond.

Zelensky had a phone call with Merkel on the Russian buildup on November 25. They agreed to coordinate international community efforts on Russian threats and preserving sanctions policy.¹⁷⁰ They also discussed the migration crisis on the border with Belarus and Poland.

Zelensky had a telephone conversation with the President of the European Council Charles Michel on November 25. They agreed to coordinate efforts and discussed the Russian buildup. Michel discussed the results of his call with Putin from November 24. Michel said that de-escalation of the situation could be helped by contacts between the Ukrainian and Russian sides with the participation of the EU.

Ukrainian Force Deployments

Ukraine launched a new operation to reinforce Ukrainian-Belarusian border on November 24. Ukraine's State Border Guard Service announced a new special operation on the border with Belarus called "Poissya" with Border guards, national police, national guard, Ukrainian army, and "other reserves" to counteract illegal migrant risks on November 24.¹⁷¹ Ukrainian Interior Minister Denis Monastyrskiy announced on November 11 that Ukraine would reinforce the border with Belarus with 3,000 border guards, 3,500 national guardsmen, and 2,000 national police.¹⁷² Ukraine has not openly deployed military units to the Belarusian border or elsewhere as of November 24.

Ukraine used javelins for the first time in training exercises in Zaporizhia in mid-to-late November. Ukraine's General Staff Stated on November 23 that Ukraine used Javelins in training exercises at the Shiroky Lan Training Ground, Zaporizhia Oblast, Ukraine.¹⁷³ Ukrainian forces also exercised with Bayraktar TB2 drones at this exercise. Ukraine has not used the Javelin in combat operations yet.

The OSCE observed a likely Ukrainian electronic warfare system near Donbas for the first time on November 23. The OSCE reports that they spotted a "probable" Ukrainian Khortytsia-M electronic warfare system about 5km from the front line, east of Mariupol.¹⁷⁴ This is the first sighting of the Ukrainian EW system near the front.

Belarus

Active duty Belarusian forces began countrywide combat readiness classes to improve their ability to support a mass mobilization on December 7.¹⁷⁵ Belarusian forces have not mobilized as of December 7. The training emphasizes maintaining mobilization readiness for large Belarusian formations and command and control elements. This training supports assessed Russian efforts to permanently deploy Russian forces to Belarus.

Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko announced Minsk's intent to develop industrial cooperation with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) on December 7. Golovchenko stated that Western sanctions against Belarus will not achieve their goals and that Russia and Belarus can “withstand any pressure” together.¹⁷⁶

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko announced that he will deliver an address to Belarus' parliament in January and repeated false claims about a NATO buildup near Belarus on December 6.¹⁷⁷ Lukashenko stated that Russia will not attack Ukraine and reiterated Belarus' support for Russia. Lukashenko stated that NATO seeks to encircle Russia with a “a chain [of states hostile to Russia] from the Black to Baltic Sea.” Lukashenko repeated his claim that the West is conducting a hybrid war color revolution against Belarus. Lukashenko stated that if opposition leaders ousted Lukashenko's regime in 2020, then there would have been a “NATO bloc near Smolensk.” Lukashenko reiterated Kremlin narratives that the Belarusian opposition seeks to break the Union State with Russia, bring Belarus into NATO, create an autocephalous Belarusian Orthodox church, and ban the Russian language.

The Belarusian Defense Ministry claimed that a Ukrainian Mi-8 helicopter violated Belarusian airspace in Novaya Rudnya, Belarus, on December 4.¹⁷⁸ Belarusian officials claimed that a Ukrainian Mi-8 flew one kilometer into Belarusian airspace while conducting Ukraine's “Poissya” border security operation.¹⁷⁹ Ukraine's State Border Service denied any violations on December 4.¹⁸⁰ A Belarusian border guard official said Belarusian border guards would “will act extremely harshly” if Ukraine further violates the border.¹⁸¹ These claims reinforce Belarusian and Kremlin information operations about a supposed Ukrainian threat to Belarus and support Russian efforts to set informational conditions for deploying Russian forces into Belarus.

Kremlin news outlet Rossiya Segodnya published on December 2 that Lukashenko stated he would not exclude increasing Belarus' armed forces from 65,000 to 70,000 men to “cover [Belarus'] south” during a November 30 interview.¹⁸² Rossiya Segodnya continues to release new portions of its November 30 interview with Lukashenko piecemeal. Lukashenko also stated that recently announced joint Russian-Belarusian exercises on Belarus' southern border with Ukraine will occur within the next two months.¹⁸³

Lukashenko said Ukraine is “under external control” during the November 30 Rossiya Segodnya interview.¹⁸⁴ This statement supports a Russian propaganda narrative that NATO and Western states, primarily the United States, have turned Ukraine into a proxy. Lukashenko's rhetoric is increasingly aligned with Kremlin narratives in an unprecedented manner. Analysts should consider Lukashenko's actions as increasingly directed by the Kremlin. Belarusian forces will likely support Kremlin objectives in any intensified military and information operations against Ukraine and / or NATO.

Lukashenko said that recent Western actions encouraged deeper Russian-Belarusian integration at a meeting with the governor of Russia's Astrakhan Oblast on December 2.¹⁸⁵ Lukashenko's statement about “Western actions” references both a falsely claimed NATO hybrid war that Lukashenko claims the West has waged against Belarus since fall 2020 and a falsely claimed NATO buildup near Russian and Belarusian borders since fall 2021.

Russian military units' freedom of movement in Belarus will likely increase in 2022. Belarusian Armed Forces officially began the new military training year for 2021-2022 on December 1 with an explicit emphasis on intensive combat training.¹⁸⁶ The Belarusian MoD stated that Belarusian exercises in 2022 will occur not only at training grounds but also in “individual terrain sections of [Belarus'] territory.”¹⁸⁷ A permanent Russian deployment to Belarus is increasingly likely. Belarusian exercises typically occur at established military training grounds. The extended range of new exercises in Belarus likely presage expanded Russian force posture shifts within Belarus. Belarusian officials stated on November 29 that Russia and Belarus will conduct a joint exercise on Belarus' southern border with Ukraine at an unspecified future date.¹⁸⁸ Belarusian units have not yet begun conducting exercises as of December 1, however they will likely begin within the next several days or weeks.¹⁸⁹

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said he would not exclude offering to host Russian nuclear weapons in Belarus if NATO deploys nuclear weapons to Eastern Europe on November 30.¹⁹⁰ Lukashenko implied that Belarus is ready to resume hosting Russian nuclear infrastructure – as it did during the Soviet era – if NATO deploys nuclear missile structures to Eastern Europe.¹⁹¹ This is a significant inflection in Lukashenko's rhetoric about his openness to hosting Russian weapon systems in Belarus. Prior to August 2020 Lukashenko was stalwartly opposed to Russia increasing its military infrastructure in Belarus beyond two Soviet legacy radar stations. This statement indicates an increased likelihood of a permanent Russian force deployment to Belarus. Lukashenko and Russian President Vladimir Putin also had phone call on November 29 about the situation in Belarus and Russia prior to the interview on November 30 which the Kremlin did not report.¹⁹² Putin warned against NATO deploying hypersonic missiles to Ukraine on November 30.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko signaled that Belarus will support Russia during any military escalation in Donbas on November 29. Lukashenko stated that if the West conducts a military operation in Donbas or against Russian borders, then “Belarus will not be left on the sidelines. It is very clear on whose side Belarus will be.”¹⁹³ Lukashenko also reiterated false Kremlin claims about reports of a Russian offensive being propaganda and claims of increased NATO force buildups against Belarus. This is a significant inflection in Lukashenko's rhetoric towards Ukraine. Lukashenko's rhetoric on Donbas typically has not so closely aligned with Kremlin talking points.

Belarus' Ministry of Defense announced that Russia and Belarus will conduct a joint exercise on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border, possibly on December 1. Belarusian Defense Minister Khrenin announced that all Belarusian troops will begin combat exercises on December 1 at a Belarusian General Staff meeting on November 29.¹⁹⁴ Khrenin also announced a joint military exercise with Russia on the Belarusian-Ukrainian border on an unspecified future date which could correspond with the Belarusian exercises that will begin on December 1.¹⁹⁵ Khrenin stated that enemy force groups near Belarus' western and southern directions necessitate these measures to protect the Union State.¹⁹⁶ Russia will very likely deploy ground forces to Belarus within the next several days or weeks.

A Belarusian Mechanized Brigade from Grodno reportedly will deploy to Belarus's southern border with Ukraine. Belarusian online news outlet Motolko reported on November 29 that the Belarusian 6th Mechanized Brigade based in Folush, Grodno, will deploy to Belarus' southern border with Ukraine.¹⁹⁷ There is no open-source evidence of a deployment of the Belarusian 6th Brigade towards Ukraine as of November 29.

The Belarusian MoD continued to accuse Poland and Lithuania of deploying forces closer to Belarus on November 26. The Belarusian Head of the Main Directorate of Ideological Work of the Ministry of Defense on November 26 stated, “Unfortunately, we cannot note any positive steps taken by our neighbors [regarding alleged Polish and Baltic military deployments near Belarus]. Along with the previously announced unfriendly steps to deploy troops and infrastructure, which make it possible to significantly increase the combat strength and create groupings in a short time, we note the further actions of our neighbors aimed at escalating the situation.”¹⁹⁸ The official claimed that Lithuania concentrated approximately 4,000 troops and criticized Ukraine’s new “Poissya” border security operation. The Belarusian MoD stated it is prepared to quickly create its own force groupings if necessary.

Russia and Belarus decided to increase the quantity of combined Russian-Belarusian air patrols in Belarusian airspace on November 25. The Belarusian MoD stated that it made the decision to increase joint patrols due to an increase in foreign aviation around Belarus’ border – a reference to claimed NATO flights near Belarus. A combined Russian-Belarusian tactical group of Su-30SM conducted a flight patrol along the Belarusian border on November 25.¹⁹⁹

Russian elements’ presence in Belarusian exercises will likely further expand in 2022. Chief of the Belarusian General Staff Viktor Gulevich stated on November 23 that the Belarusian MoD “significantly adjusted” the training process of the Belarusian Armed Forces in 2021-2022 after “taking into account the difficult military-political situation created by Western countries” in regard to the migrant crisis. “We are forced to respond to the intensification of military activity along the outer contour of the State Border of the Republic of Belarus.” Gulevich accused a “belt of unfriendly states” surrounding Belarus like an “anaconda.”²⁰⁰ Gulevich stated Belarus will thus intensify Belarusian exercises.

Strategic Calendar

November – December: Waterways near the Pinsk Marshes freeze.²⁰¹ Some bogs don’t ever freeze.²⁰² Generally, freezing of Russian bog massifs usually begins about two weeks after the stable transition of air temperature through 0 degrees Celsius to negative values.²⁰³ Pinsk historically gets to around this condition in late December through February.²⁰⁴ Russian geographic information indicates that traversing the Pinsk Marshes, even in winter, is dangerous; the ice is thin in many spots and even experienced adventures who traverse it on foot can fall through and drown.²⁰⁵ It is unclear how traversable the marshes actually are for mechanized forces, even in best winter conditions.

December 1: Zelensky delivered an address to the Verkhovna Rada in which he reiterated Ukraine’s desire to implement the European Union Association agreement and articulated readiness to talk to the Kremlin.

December 2: Meeting between US, Russian, and Ukrainian foreign ministers in Stockholm, Sweden.²⁰⁶

December 6-10: Likely new German Cabinet.²⁰⁷

December 7: Tentative date for a Putin-Biden videoconference.²⁰⁸

December 23: Tentative date for a Putin end-of-year address.²⁰⁹

December – January: Anticipated joint Russo-Belarusian exercise on Belarus' southern border with Ukraine.²¹⁰

January: Lukashenko gives speech to the Belarusian parliament and nation.²¹¹

January 15 – February 15: Freeze in Ukraine that Ukrainian Military Intelligence (GUR) is forecasting the Russians will plan maneuvers around. Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council contradicts GUR's claims and does not see these dates as particularly significant as of November 25.²¹²

Late March- Mid April: Rasputitsa – though it varies by region and local climate factors.²¹³

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<https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/2259556680852708>

<https://www.mil.gov.ua/news/2021/11/29/czentr-operativnogo-informuvannya-povidomlyae/>

² Taftneft complained about difficulties in railway transit on November 22 (likely because the MoD is hogging all the rail space to move military equipment). The Russian Steel Association made similar complaints in late October.

<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/5088497>

³ <https://www.facebook.com/DefenceIntelligenceofUkraine/posts/2253984518076591>; https://rus.lb.ua/society/2021/11/26/499511_smi_ustanovili_poligon_gde_nachalis.html

⁴ <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vysokoe-napryazhenie/>

⁵ <https://www.interfax.ru/russia/806280>

⁶ <https://twitter.com/Archer83Able/status/1458490741383118861>;

https://twitter.com/The_Lookout_N/status/1458525213088419843

⁷ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12396540@egNews

⁸ <https://tvrain.ru>

https://tvrain.ru/news/cit_nashel_video_s_perebroskoj_voennoj_tehniki_iz_sibiri_v_storonu_ukrainskoj_granitsy-543075/?from=rss

⁹ https://twitter.com/The_Lookout_N/status/1463464521096470528/photo/2

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https://twitter.com/The_Lookout_N/status/1465976263932358659

¹¹ <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/13005419>

¹² <https://tass.ru/armiya-i-opk/13036389>

¹³ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12396948@egNews

¹⁴ https://function.mil.ru/news_page/country/more.htm?id=12397530@egNews

¹⁵ <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/202111241251-8fMD3.html>

¹⁶ <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67250>

¹⁷ <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/141918/>; <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/141484/>

¹⁸ <http://www.svr.gov.ru/smi/2021/11/ssha-provotsiruyut-obostrenie-na-vostoke-ukrainy.htm>

¹⁹ <https://www.interfax.ru/world/805489>; <https://president.gov.by/ru/events/coveshchanie-po-voprosam-voennoy-bezopasnosti>; <https://www.mil.by/ru/news/142016/>

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²² https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4975267

²³ <https://novosti.dn.ua/news/318099-v-partiyu-edinaya-rossiya-vstupila-pervaya-sotnya-zhitelej-ordlo>

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²⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-putin/putin-warns-of-second-srebrenica-if-no-amnesty-for-east-ukraine-idUSKBN1YE240>

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²⁷ <https://tass.com/world/1371895>

²⁸ <https://iz.ru/1260565/2021-12-07/obse-zafiksirovala-perebrosku-ukrainoi-voennoi-tekhniki-v-donbass>

²⁹ https://www.osce.org/files/2021-12-06%20SMM%20Daily%20Report_Vienna.pdf?itok=12715

³⁰ <https://riaan dot ru/1566593-boicy-vsu-razmestili-bolee-15-tankov-i-btr-v-treh-naselennyh-punktah-donbassa>

³¹ <https://riaan dot ru/1565843-narodnaya-miliciya-lnr-obvinila-kiev-v-primenenii-stancii-radioelektronnoi-borby-v-donbasse>

³² <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/506816>; <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/506816>

³³ <https://www.dw dot com/en/moscow-claims-us-spy-plane-nearly-caused-mid-air-catastrophe/a-60027286>

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³⁷ <https://tvzvezda dot ru/news/2021123625-B2i11.html>

³⁸ <https://www.vg dot no/nyheter/utenriks/i/z7VJV9/stoere-regjeringen-vil-begrense-alliert-trafikk-naer-russland>

³⁹ https://www.mid dot ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/4978054

⁴⁰ https://twitter.com/RT_com/status/1466350620370259970

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⁴⁶ https://www.mid dot ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJEo2Bw/content/id/4976862

⁴⁷ NATO published “Myths About Relations Between Russia and the Alliance” on October 22. https://www.mid dot ru/ru/foreign_policy/rso/-/asset_publisher/ovP3hQoCPRg5/content/id/4975308; <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/115204.htm>

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⁵⁰ Zelensky previously registered the same international drills approval bill in April and December 2020, and September 2021. [http://w1.c1http://w1.c1 dot rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc2_5_1_J?ses=10010&num_s=2&num=&date1=&date2=&name_zp=+%E4%EE%EF%F3%F1%EA+%EF%B3%E4%F0%EE%E7%E4%B3%EB%B3%E2+%E7%E1%F0%EE%E9%ED%E8%F5+%F1%E8%EB+%B3%ED%F8%E8%F5+%E4%E5%F0%E6%EO%E2+%ED%EO+%F2%E5%F0%E8%F2%EE%F0%B3%FE&out_type=&id=](http://w1.c1http://w1.c1 dot rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc2_5_1_J?ses=10010&num_s=2&num=&date1=&date2=&name_zp=+%E4%EE%EF%F3%F1%EA+%EF%B3%E4%F0%EE%E7%E4%B3%EB%B3%E2+%E7%E1%F0%EE%E9%ED%E8%F5+%F1%E8%EB+%B3%ED%F8%E8%F5+%E4%E5%F0%E6%EO%E2+%ED%EO+%F2%E5%F0%E8%F2%EE%F0%B3%FE&out_type=&id=51)

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⁵² <https://tass dot ru/politika/13049145>; <https://iz dot ru/1256484/2021-11-28/peskov-nazval-nepriemlemym-nagnetanie-vokrug-rossiiskoi-ugrozy>

⁵³ <https://tass dot ru/politika/13049145>; <https://iz dot ru/1256484/2021-11-28/peskov-nazval-nepriemlemym-nagnetanie-vokrug-rossiiskoi-ugrozy>

⁵⁴ https://viar dot media/watch_video.php?v=3606

⁵⁵ <https://www.osce.org/special-monitoring-mission-to-ukraine/437756>

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