

# Conflict Update # 309

December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022

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## Conflict Assessment

**Russian losses** – 104,560 (790) soldiers killed, 3,018 (+1) enemy tanks, 6,047 (+10) armored combat vehicles, 2,004 (+5) artillery systems, 423 (+5) MLRS systems, 212 (+0) air defense systems, 283 (+0) warplanes, 268 (+1) helicopters, 1,717 (+10) UAVs of the operational-tactical level, 653 (+0) cruise missiles, 16 (+0) warships/cutters, 4,675 (+15) trucks and tankers, 4 Iskander Missile Launchers (+0), 239 fuel bowsers (+0) and 179 (+0) units of equipment.

## Key Takeaways



**Russian losses 2<sup>nd</sup> highest** – Russian, soldiers killed yesterday at 790 is the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest toll in a single day of fighting since the invasion began. These were primarily suffered in the Lyman.Bakhmut area and confirms yesterday's reports of

Russian battalions now fighting as companies and troops as opposed to full strength. They do not have sufficient men to field battalio-strength groups.

**Ukrainian military says it shot down 54 out of 69 Russian missiles** - Ukraine's military said it had shot down 54 missiles of 69 launched by Russia in its latest air attacks.

"This morning, the aggressor launched air and sea-based cruise missiles, anti-aircraft guided missiles to the S-300 ADMS at energy infrastructure facilities of our country," wrote Ukraine's top general, Valery Zaluzhny, on Telegram.

**Note** – This number is not included in today's numbers above.

**Belarus summons Ukraine over rogue missile** - The military commissar of the Brest region, Oleg Konovalov, told locals they had "absolutely nothing to worry about." "Unfortunately, these things happen," he said.

"The Belarusian side views this incident as extremely serious," Belarusian foreign ministry spokesman Anatoly Glaz said.

"We demanded that the Ukrainian side conduct a thorough investigation ... [and] hold those responsible to account and take comprehensive measures to prevent the recurrence of such incidents in the future."

A Ukrainian military spokesman acknowledged that the missile was a Ukrainian stray, saying the incident was "nothing strange, a result of air defence" and something that "has happened more than once".

Belarus said the missile had come down near the village of Harbacha in the Brest region, some 15km (9 miles) from the border with Ukraine, at around 10am (07:00 GMT).

**Comment** – Very rich coming from a government that has freely allowed its territory and airspace to be used by Russian forces to invade Ukraine. But, of more import, is this the start of a false flag series of incidents to justify a northern front opening?

**Russia plans to disrupt Western arms supplies to Ukraine: Lavrov** - Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov has said his country's military is working on new plans to cut off supplies of weapons and ammunition sent from abroad for the Ukrainian forces.

During an interview on Russian television on Wednesday, Lavrov said there were calls among military experts to interrupt supply routes channelling weapons from the West to Ukraine.

"We observe that Ukraine is receiving more and more and better Western weapons," Lavrov said. "Railway lines, bridges and tunnels" are being considered, he said. "I assume that they will make professional decisions on how to make these deliveries more difficult or, ideally, stop them altogether."

**A fresh wave of Russian strikes pounded cities throughout Ukraine**, wounding several people in the capital and leaving the western city of Lviv almost without electricity, but the Ukrainian military said it had managed to neutralize most of the missiles.

**Russia says it has shot down a drone near Engels air base** - A Russian regional governor says air defences had shot down a drone near the Engels airbase.

Russia says Ukraine has already tried to attack the base twice this month, killing at least six Russian servicemen, although it said there was only slight damage to two aircraft.

As usual Russia downplays any attack so as to minimize bad milblogger and social media coverage at home. It is estimated that far more Russians were killed in the drone attacks, as well as damage to several aircraft. I am sure ISW will study geophoto evidence and report shortly.

“Air defence systems shot down an unmanned aerial vehicle in the Engels region,” Saratov Governor Roman Busargin wrote in a message on Telegram on Thursday.

Falling debris damaged residential property, but nobody was injured, he said.

The Engels base is one of two that host Russia’s airborne nuclear forces.

The strikes have raised questions about the effectiveness of Russian air defences, mainly when the front line is so far away.

**Amid intense fighting, Ukrainian forces advance on Kreminna in Luhansk Region** - Ukrainian troops battling in the eastern Luhansk region -- one of four provinces Russia announced it was annexing after sham referendums -- are focusing on Kreminna and nearby settlements.

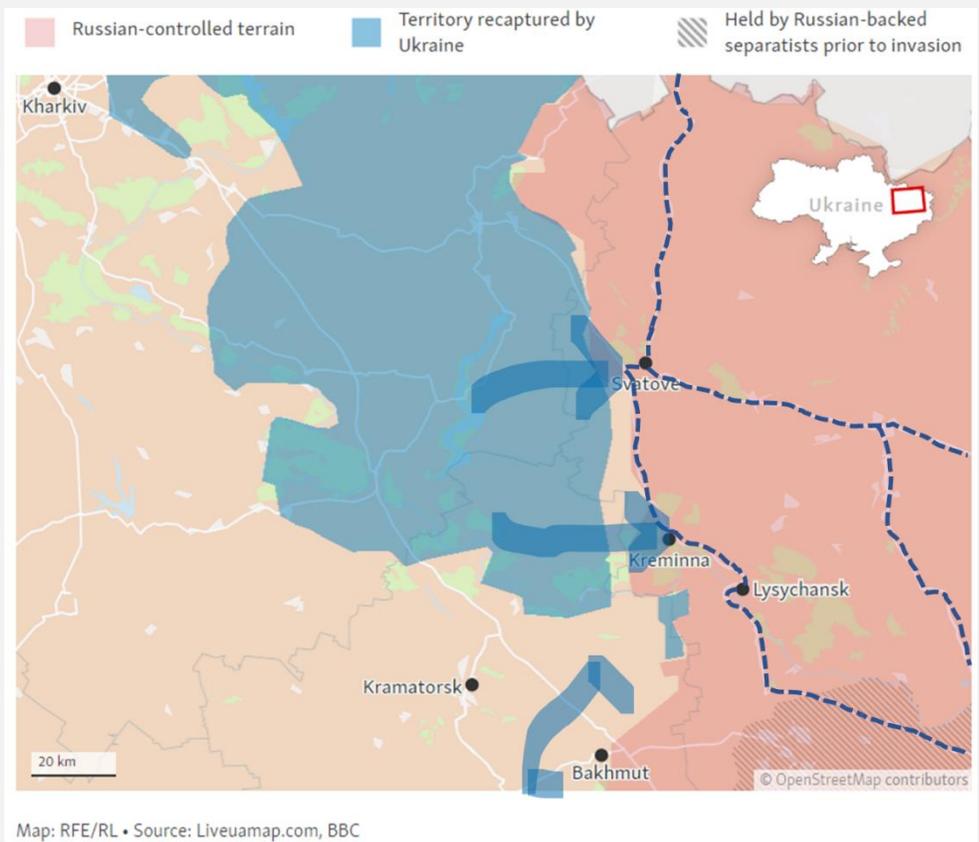
Seizing control of these key logistics points would solidify advances that began in the fall in Kharkiv, observers say. Ukrainian troops say Russia, despite larger numbers, is burning through its infantry by sending in inexperienced soldiers with "no tactics at all."

**Comment** – We have been watching this area for some months now given its importance to Russian supply routes to Ukrainian oblasts further south from Kreminna.

Just north of the town is the rail hub around Svatove, even more important as it forms a junction for inbound Russian train movement to other battle fronts.

In the map to the right one can see the blue dotted lines that represent rail lines used by Russia to ferry heavy armor, ammunition, troops and supplies into the Donbas and further south. Blue arrows represent Ukrainian pushes to these two critical junctions. Svatove in particular is important as it straddles the junction leading to Mariupol and Donetsk.

A drone hit the Engels airbase, one of Russia's largest military airfields, which hosts the strategic Tupolev Tu-160 and Tu-95 bombers.



Ukrainian soldiers near Kreminna said they'd seen similar tactics.

"They just push and shove their way through. And a lot of them die. Because they have no tactics, nothing of the sort," another soldier said. "They just go like meat. There were some cases when the infantry said that they went in without any [armed vehicles], or without machine guns."

"They have a lot of artillery," a fourth soldier said, adding that the newer shells that have been provided by the United States and NATO allies to Ukraine are more effective. "Our [artillery] hits with 5- to 10-meter accuracy. But these new ones that we've been given, it's 4 to 5 meters."

Another said Ukrainian forces were focused on disrupting Russian supply lines in the settlements around Kreminna (see comment above).

"The enemy's logistics routes run through these villages. And, as we know, logistics is a priority. A fighter who isn't backed up properly can't fight," he said. "There's a railway junction. [Seizing it] will greatly disrupt their logistics. Then, I think, they will retreat from Bakhmut."

**'We fight with our brains. They fight with numbers': Ukrainian paratroopers on the battle for the Donbas City of Kreminna** - For the paratroopers of a Ukrainian airborne brigade, there's only one way to describe the waves of Russian infantry who are relentlessly pressing the Ukrainian lines in and around this Donbas city: Meat.

"First, they throw in the mobilized soldiers for certain death, like meat," said one soldier who asked not to be identified due to military regulations. "Then, if they break through, the more experienced fighters move in."

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine now in its 11th month, the ferocity of the fighting in Kreminna is matched only by the intensity of the fighting 80 kilometers to the south, in the city of Bakhmut.

But according to interviews with Ukrainian soldiers and accounts published on Russian military blogger accounts on Telegram and elsewhere, the bloodshed is no less senseless and relentless. It's unclear how long it will last, though: One Ukrainian official claims that Kreminna is on the verge of being recaptured by Ukrainian forces.

"Bakhmut, Kreminna: The situation there is difficult, excruciating," President Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address on December 26. The Russians "are using all available resources -- and these are significant resources -- to squeeze out some sort of progress."

Located in the Luhansk region, just across the administrative border with the Donetsk region, Kreminna sits on a major north-south highway about 25 kilometers northwest of Syevyerodonetsk. That city was captured by Russian forces in late June after a brutal siege and intense, street-by-street urban combat.

**The Russian offensive against Bakhmut is likely culminating as ISW forecasted on December 27** - US military doctrine defines culmination as the "point at which a force no longer has the capability to continue its form of operations, offense or defense," and "when a force cannot continue the attack and must assume a defensive posture or execute an operational pause." If Russian forces in Bakhmut have indeed culminated, they may nevertheless continue to attack aggressively. Culminated Russian forces may continue to conduct ineffective squad-sized assaults against Bakhmut, though these assaults would be very unlikely to make operationally significant gains.

Several indicators support the assessment that Russian forces around Bakhmut have culminated.

Senior Ukrainian officials are visiting frontline positions in Bakhmut unimpeded. Ukraine's Military Intelligence Directorate (GUR) chief, Kyrylo Budanov, visited Bakhmut on December 27-28 and was geolocated to within at least 600 meters of the previously recorded Russian forward line of troops. Budanov's visit supports previous Ukrainian

social media reports that Ukrainian forces conducted a tactical counterattack that repelled Russian forces from the outskirts of Bakhmut on December 21. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Bakhmut on December 20.

Recent combat footage supports ISW's previous assessment that Russian forces are operating in squad-sized assault groups due to combat losses, with footage posted on December 26 showing Ukrainian fire defeating squad-sized groups of 5-10 unsupported Russian infantry attempting a disorderedly assault on Novoselivske in Luhansk Oblast. This footage, while not from Bakhmut, is consistent with a senior Ukrainian official's report that Russian forces in the Bakhmut area are no longer operating as company and battalion tactical groups but are instead operating in smaller groups of 10 to 15 servicemembers (squad-size organizations) as of December 27.

Russian airborne forces (VDV) are reportedly augmenting Wagner Group operations around Bakhmut. A Russian source reported that Wagner and VDV elements conducted joint operations in Bakhmut on December 27. The report, if true, marks an inflection given that the Wagner Group has been conducting information operations to assert that their forces exclusively are operating in Bakhmut. The conventional Russian military supporting Wagner Group elements in Bakhmut—after Wagner took efforts to emphasize it exclusively is responsible for the Bakhmut sector—would be consistent with indicators for the Wagner Group forces' culmination.

ISW has previously assessed that Wagner Group forces are serving a chiefly attritional role around Bakhmut and have therefore likely become degraded to a near-debilitating extent and need reinforcement from more conventional Russian elements. High rates of attrition amongst the forces responsible for the offensive on Bakhmut may expedite the culmination unless notable numbers of regular Russian military units are sent to sustain the offensive and delay or avert its culmination.

**Russian forces appear to be preparing for a decisive effort in Luhansk Oblast** - although it is unclear whether for defensive or offensive operations with them continuing to accumulate equipment and forces in Luhansk.

VDV elements previously operating in Kherson Oblast have redeployed to Luhansk Oblast following their withdrawal from west bank Kherson Oblast in November. Social media images from late December increasingly show Russian equipment in transit in Luhansk Oblast.

Their forces are operating military district-level thermobaric artillery assets in the Luhansk area of operations, which may indicate a prioritization of operations in this area. Ukrainian intelligence reported on December 26 that Russia appointed a new Western Military District (WMD) commander who is commanding Russian forces out of a command post in Boguchar, Voronezh Oblast.

WMD elements (such as the 144th Motorized Rifle Division) are the principal forces operating in the Luhansk sector and a command change could indicate efforts to support a new decisive effort in this area.

Senior Ukrainian officials have observed Russian forces in Belarus and Zaporizhia are not forming strike groups as of late December, but notably have not made similar statements about Russian forces in Luhansk Oblast.

Enemy forces have been establishing extensive trenches and field fortifications in Luhansk for several months—activity that could support a planned Russian decisive effort in the vicinity of Luhansk Oblast (**Comment** – We covered this in previous Updates). These indicators may suggest their forces in Luhansk Oblast are preparing for an offensive operation, as ISW has previously forecasted, but may also indicate preparation for larger spoiling attacks or a defensive counterattack to take advantage of Ukrainian counteroffensive efforts in the area that the Russians expect to stop.

**Comment** – It is also possible that the Kremlin is concerned that Ukrainian forces will push to cut their command in two by reaching Mariupol along the coast. Their trench structure is configured in such a way as to denote a staggered fall back strategy should any lines see Ukraine breaching their defenses.

**The Kremlin continues to present the US transfer of Patriot air defense systems** and accompanying trainers to Ukraine as an escalation in US-Russia relations, despite the fact that the transfer is if anything less escalatory than previous Western military shipments to Ukraine because Patriot is a purely defensive system.

Russian FM Lavrov claimed in a televised interview yesterday that US officials had guaranteed to not send Patriot air defense trainers to Ukraine in an effort to refrain from participating in the war. The Kremlin has previously highlighted the US transfer of Patriot air-defense systems in accusations that the US and the West are waging a proxy war in Ukraine with the intent of weakening or destroying the Russian Federation.

The Kremlin uses these accusations in support of information operations that aim to frame Ukraine as a Western puppet devoid of sovereignty and to weaken Western security assistance to Ukraine by stoking fears of Russian escalation. They could use any Western transfer of military equipment to Ukraine as support for these information operations.

Their decision to react to the transfer of the Patriot air defense systems more strongly than to previous weapons transfers indicates that they are more concerned with the effect Western help can have on Russia's invasion of Ukraine than with supposed Russian fears of putative Ukrainian offensive actions against the Russian Federation itself using Western systems. That observation is worth considering in the context of Western discussions of providing Ukraine with Western tanks, long-range attack systems, and other capabilities.

ISW forecasts with high confidence that Putin will not seek to engage NATO militarily at this time in response to the provision of any of the Western military systems currently under discussion. Russia is barely holding off the Ukrainian military at a fearful cost to itself and Russian forces in Ukraine could not survive a serious conflict with NATO at this time. The risks of deliberate Russian escalation to a major conflict with NATO in the foreseeable future are thus extremely low.

## Russian Mobilization

The Kremlin has approved additional funds for the development of defensive fortifications and is attempting to staff these efforts in Russian border areas and occupied Ukraine. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin announced two days ago that the Kremlin has allocated 34 billion rubles (approximately \$467 million dollars) for the construction of fortifications in regions bordering Ukraine, likely including in illegally annexed Ukrainian territories.

Russian occupation officials have previously boasted about the construction of defensive lines in Zaporizhia Oblast, and satellite imagery showed that Russian forces and Wagner Group are fortifying positions in Luhansk, Donetsk, Zaporizhia, and Kherson oblasts, and Crimea. Mishustin also promised they will conduct checks on the proper allocation of funds to satisfy the needs of the "special military operation." A Russian opposition outlet reported Russian authorities are reportedly inviting janitors and public sanitation workers in Moscow to volunteer to dig trenches in Donbas in exchange for a one-time payment of 50,000 rubles (about \$700) and a daily compensation of 1,000 rubles per day (about \$14)

Putin continues to expand social benefits to participants of the "special military operation" while continuing to deny Russians are participating in a full-fledged war. He yesterday signed a law providing free social services to disabled individuals who have participated in a combat operation. He also extended such a provision to participants of World War II, survivors of the Leningrad blockade, and survivors of the siege of Sevastopol during World War II.

The Kremlin had only previously offered such accommodations for free to persons affected by emergencies and minors. Putin introduced several benefits to individuals involved in his war effort—servicemen and civilians—that commit Russia to a long-term financial responsibility and continues to undertake costly provisions for a campaign that he is unable to declare a war.

Russian officials may fear the long-term detrimental consequences of the war on Russia's population. Russian Union of Lawyers Head Igor Trunov stated yesterday that the Russian Health Ministry has determined it can offer federal financial support for free conservation and storage of the sperm of mobilized servicemen who participate in the war between 2022 and 2024 in response to his appeal to create a "free cryobank of genetic material."

Trunov stated the Russian Union of Lawyers plans to seek the free cryopreservation of genetic material on behalf of several interested couples whose husbands were mobilized. The Russian Ministry of Health has yet to officially comment on Trunov's statements.

Russian forces are continuing to face low morale and poor discipline problems, resulting in violent incidents within the military. A Russian opposition outlet reported that a drunk mobilized Russian serviceman beat his commander to death in Chelyabinsk Oblast. Local Russian outlets also reported that a Russian mobilized serviceman was found dead by strangulation in Saratov Oblast. The mobilized man also reportedly had hematomas and abrasions on his body.

Ukrainian media amplified footage on December 28 reportedly showing a fire at the Russian 150th Motorized Rifle Division's barracks in Novocherkassk, Rostov Oblast.

## Impacts

**Kherson maternity hospital hit as Russia continues bombardment** - Russian forces are continuing their bombardment of the recently liberated city of Kherson, launching numerous strikes against the city on Tuesday and Wednesday that hit targets including the maternity ward of a hospital.

Thirty-three strikes were launched on Kherson in the 24 hours until Wednesday morning, according to the Ukrainian military's daily report.

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's deputy chief of staff, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, wrote on Telegram that the maternity ward was among the locations hit. Two babies had been born on the ward on Tuesday before the attack, he said, and medical staff had been able to complete a caesarean section before evacuating to a shelter.

**Odesa takes down monuments to Catherine the Great** - Ukraine's port city of Odesa has taken down monuments to two Russian heroes, including Catherine the Great.

The city council took down the monuments under a November 30 decision, which also posted pictures of the process on its Telegram account.

Under the city council decision, the monument to Catherine the Great, known as the "founder of Odesa" and one honoring 18th century Russian General Alexander Suvorov, are headed to the Odesa Fine Arts Museum, said a statement.

The war began amid claims that Ukraine was part of Russia. Still, the ongoing conflict has meant a diminished affinity for Russian culture, language, and history among Ukrainians, according to observers.

**U.S.-Trained Afghan soldiers angry over their plight are ready to join Russia's war against Ukraine** - Lost status and a desperate existence in Iran are driving thousands of former Afghan troops -- many of them elite commandos trained by the United States -- to consider fighting as mercenaries in Ukraine and other battlefields.

Many ex-Afghan security personnel accuse the United States of abandoning them after the Taliban regained power last year. They also say poverty and security concerns are factoring into their decisions to take a private Russian mercenary group up on its recruitment offers.

According to WhatsApp messages viewed by RFE/RL's Radio Azadi, some former Afghan commandos are already making the move to join the Wagner Group, also known as Wagner, a private paramilitary organization that plays a prominent role in the Kremlin's war against Ukraine.

## Peace Talks

**No signs that Russia wants peace, says Italian PM** - Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni says there are no signs that Russia wants peace in Ukraine, urging continued international backing for Kyiv.

The prime minister said supporting Ukraine was key to maintaining a balance of power on the battlefield and creating conditions for peace.

Speaking at an end-of-year news conference, Meloni also said she intends to visit the Ukrainian capital before the first anniversary of the Russian invasion, which began on February 24.

Meloni says she believes Russia will realise the “enormous error” it made in invading Ukraine and that Rome would help Kyiv’s war effort.

“We will defend Ukrainian international rights, sovereignty and freedom,” Meloni told reporters at the prime minister’s traditional end-of-year news conference.

**Russia’s Lavrov rejects Zelenskyy’s ‘peace formula’: RIA** - Russia will not use Ukrainian President Zelenskyy’s “peace formula” as a basis for negotiations and believes Kyiv is still not ready for real peace talks, Russia’s RIA news agency cited foreign minister Sergey Lavrov as saying on Thursday.

Lavrov also told RIA that Kyiv’s idea of driving Russia out of eastern Ukraine and Crimea with Western help was “an illusion.”

The Russian foreign minister’s comments come as Zelenskyy has been pressing the G20, United Nations and other countries and groupings to embrace a 10-point peace plan.

**ISW** - The Kremlin continues to demonstrate that Russia has no genuine intention of engaging in negotiations with Ukraine by insisting that Ukraine accept Russia’s illegal annexations of Ukrainian land.

Kremlin Spokesperson Dmitry Peskov responded to the Ukrainian proposal to prepare a peace initiative at the UN in February and emphasized no peace plan can exist for Ukraine without accounting for the entry of Zaporizhia, Kherson, Donetsk, and Luhansk oblasts into the Russian Federation. He clearly indicated the Kremlin has no genuine intent to compromise its demands, thus directly undermining the Kremlin’s own narrative that Russia is willing to talk but Ukraine is not.

ISW has continuously reported that Russia is using the discussion of negotiations as an information operation to force Ukraine into making massive concessions on Russia’s terms. Russian leaders’ insistence that Ukraine enter negotiations having accepted the illegal Russian annexation of more than 100,000 square kilometers of Ukrainian land emphasizes the lack of genuine interest in negotiations on the part of the Kremlin.

## Sanctions

**Kazakhstan to send more oil to Germany** - Russian oil pipeline operator Transneft says Kazakhstan’s KazTransOil has requested 1.2 million tonnes of capacity on the Druzhba pipeline for 2023 to facilitate additional oil shipments to Germany, the RIA Novosti news agency reported.

The EU pledged to stop buying Russian oil via maritime routes from December 5 as part of broader sanctions over Ukraine.

The Druzhba pipeline remains exempt from sanctions, but Germany's refineries in Leuna and Schwedt, are no longer ordering Russian crude for next year, Germany's economy ministry has said.

According to RIA, Transneft said KazTransOil – Kazakhstan's national oil transporter – had asked to ship an additional 300,000 tonnes of oil during the first quarter of next year.

**Poland ready for Russian oil ban** - Poland is prepared for Russia's response to the G7 price cap, which will stop the sale of oil to participating countries, the climate minister said.

In response to a \$60 per barrel price cap on Russian seaborne crude, Putin on Tuesday signed a decree that bans the supply of crude oil and oil products from February 1 for five months to nations abiding by the cap.

PKN Orlen, Poland's top refinery, has secured alternative oil supplies via its partnership with Saudi Aramco.

"We are prepared to process all types of crude oil, this is our advantage," Minister of Climate and Environment Anna Moskwa told a news conference.

Moskwa also said that she believed the next EU sanctions package would include a decision on banning Russian oil.

## Containment

**UK to commit 2.3 billion pounds to Ukraine** - British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace says that the UK will allocate 2.3 billion pounds (\$2.77bn) in aid to Ukraine in 2023, adding that some of it would be non-military and humanitarian support. "From the financial year 2023, we'll put in another 2.3 billion [pounds]," Wallace told reporters about Britain's aid to Ukraine.

**Western support will result in Russia's defeat, says German minister** - Russia's invasion of Ukraine will end in military defeat due to Western support for Kyiv, according to Germany's economy minister Robert Habeck.

"Nobody would have thought that 2022 would end like this," Habeck told the DPA news agency.

"Putin is losing this war on the battlefield" because the Ukrainian army is receiving weapons from Europe, NATO and the US and is using them "skilfully and strategically, cleverly and heroically," the minister said.

"I am in favour of Germany, together with the allies, supporting Ukraine in such a way that it can win this war," said Habeck, who had advocated for arms deliveries to Kyiv before the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

**Ukrainian artillerists work hard to maintain old howitzers from Estonia** - Ukrainian gunners have learned to be versatile in their adoption of artillery pieces sent from various nations offering support. Targeting Russian invaders effectively in at least one case means mastering older Estonian-donated howitzers. There are varying maintenance needs and performance differences, with a range of ammunition sources. Finnish shells are favored by Ukrainian gunners in the Zaporizhzhya region, along with American 155-mm rounds.

## Geopolitical

**Kosovo reopens main border crossing after roadblock on Serbian side removed** - Kosovar authorities have reopened the main border crossing with Serbia after a barricade that was blocking access on the Serbian side was removed following a pledge by Belgrade that all roadblocks set up by ethnic Serbs in Kosovo would be dismantled.

Kosovar police confirmed to RFE/RL that the Merdare border crossing had been reopened immediately after the barricade, located two kilometers from border, was removed.

Merdare is Kosovo's most important border crossing for road freight, and its closure also created additional difficulties for Kosovars working abroad who are returning home for the holidays.