



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; Russia; Ukraine

FLASHPOINT: THE SEA OF AZOV

If war does break out between Russia and Ukraine, one key front will be the Sea of Azov, a body of water to the northeast of the Crimean Peninsula which separates the two nations. "In terms of security, the Sea of Azov is dominated by Russia," Ukraine's Foreign Minister, Dmytro Kuleba, said in a recent interview with the *Washington Post*. "And in case of war, it will be heavily used by them to put pressure on our southern cities on the Azov shore."

But, even short of open hostilities, Russia is already reshaping the contours of the Azov Sea in its favor. Russian interdictions of - or threats against - Ukrainian vessels there have taken place for years, impeding the functioning of Ukrainian maritime commercial activity. "This is war, too," notes Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's national security and defense council. "This is an element of their military strategy of how to beat our country." (*Washington Post*, December 25, 2021)

PUTIN MULLS HIS (MILITARY) OPTIONS

Russia's government will contemplate a range of options if its demands to the West over Ukraine aren't met, President Vladimir Putin has said. Those demands, which were issued by the Kremlin earlier in December, include a pledge from NATO not to expand further east, and a commitment not to allow Ukraine to join the Alliance. In an interview with Russian state television, Putin said that those responses "could be diverse," adding that "it will depend on what proposals our military experts submit to me." (Associated Press, December 26, 2021)

THE BIDEN-PUTIN SUMMIT: MUCH NOISE, LITTLE PROGRESS

The long-awaited telephone summit between President Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin took place on December 30th. But if policymakers in Washington were expecting the virtual meeting to smooth over bilateral tensions between the two countries, they were sorely disappointed. During the call, Putin warned that the imposition of new sanctions against Russia - something which the U.S. and European Union have threatened in response if Russia invades Ukraine anew - could lead to a "complete rupture" of relations between Washington and Moscow. For their part, U.S. officials have declined to discuss the particulars of the Biden-Putin call. However, they intimated that the Russian declarations were intended to "set the sort of tone and tenor for the [upcoming] diplomatic engagements" between the two sides. (*New York Times*, December 30, 2021)

RUSSIA'S TYRANNY OF THE LAW

Russia's legal system is being pulled in opposite directions - between the will of the people and the will of the state. "When juries decided cases in Russian courts this past year, they found defendants not guilty in almost a third of all cases; but prosecutors appealed all such verdicts as Russian law requires and appellate courts reversed the jury findings in about 90 percent of the cases, dramatically limiting the impact of jury trials on Russian justice," writes Paul Goble in his *Window on Eurasia* blog. On the other hand, "[w]hen cases are held not before a jury but only a judge, fewer than one half of one percent of defendants are found not guilty." This pattern, Goble cites Marina Yurshina of profile.ru as saying, "suggests that juries are the only part of the Russian judicial system where the presumption of innocence in fact exists." (*Window on Eurasia*, December 30, 2021)

WAR PREPARATIONS IN UKRAINE

As the prospect of a potential Russian invasion looms, Ukrainians of all walks of life are mobilizing in response. The country is seeing a surge of recruits and volunteers for exercises and trainings organized by Ukraine's Territorial Defense Forces, a branch of the country's military established several years ago to enhance readiness on the home front in the event of possible war. According to a December poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, some 58 percent of men and nearly 13 percent of women in Ukraine were "prepared to take up arms to defend the country against Russian troops." Between a fifth and a quarter of additional respondents indicated their willingness to "fight back with other means," such as sabotage or subversion, in the event of a Russian invasion. (*Financial Times*, December 31, 2021)