



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Global Health; Russia; Ukraine

RUSSIA LOOKS FOR CONSCRIPTS... IN UKRAINE

Russians who permanently reside in the breakaway Ukrainian republics of Donetsk and Luhansk may be drafted into the Russian army if war between Russia and Ukraine breaks out, a Russian lawmaker has warned. Viktor Vodolatsky, who serves as the First Deputy Chairman of the Duma Committee for CIS Affairs, Eurasian Integration and Relations with Compatriots, people living in the Ukrainian regions - which Russia is currently contemplating recognizing as independent entities - could find themselves conscripted in the event of hostilities. And if those individuals choose to join the fight of their own accord, Vodolatsky said, the Russian military will be happy to have them. "If citizens of the Russian Federation living in the territory of the DPR and LPR want to serve in the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, the Rostov regional military enlistment office will accept them, register them and call them into the army," he confirmed. (lenta.ru, January 29, 2022)

THE PANDEMIC AND RUSSIA'S POPULATION PROBLEM

The COVID-19 pandemic, and Russia's poor handling of the disease, has exacerbated the country's declining demography - deepening a persistent crisis afflicting the Russian Federation in recent decades. Between the advent of the coronavirus in early 2020 and the end of last year, Russia recorded nearly one million "excess" deaths, while other conditions - like an aging domestic population and emigration - led to the country's population declining by more than one million souls last year alone, according to new statistics from ROSSTAT, Russia's official statistics agency. This trendline, moreover, is liable to continue. More than half of Russia's population of roughly 146 million remains unvaccinated, *The Moscow Times* notes, and the Kremlin's efforts to inoculate ordinary Russians "has practically ground to a halt in recent months." (*The Moscow Times*, January 29, 2022)

ANOTHER NAVALNY ALLY IN THE CROSSHAIRS

The Kremlin is continuing its campaign of persecution against political allies of jailed opposition figure Alexei Navalny. The latest target is photographer Alexander Strukov, a former volunteer for Navalny's Moscow office. Strukov faces up to 10.5 years in prison for "extremism" and "inciting hatred." The charges stem from comments posted by Strukov on social media messaging app Telegram in which he criticized brutality by Russia's security forces. Strukov's comments, authorities said, contained "the threat of violent destructive actions" and provided a "justification to commit destructive terrorist acts" against Russian law enforcement and politicians. Strukov has been placed in pre-trial detention by a Moscow court. (*The Moscow Times*, January 31, 2022)

A PRETEXT FOR ACTION

According to U.S. officials, Russia is actively considering a plan to disseminate a fake video showing what is ostensibly an attack by Ukrainian forces against Russian military positions - and then to use the same as a rationale to initiate military hostilities against Kyiv. "The video was intended to be elaborate, officials said, with plans for graphic images of the staged, corpse-strewn aftermath of an explosion and footage of destroyed locations," the *New York Times* reports. U.S. officials "said the video was also set to include faked Ukrainian military equipment, Turkish-made drones and actors playing Russian-speaking mourners." U.S. officials hope that, by making news of the plan public, they will be able to derail it. (*New York Times*, February 3, 2022)

DISSENT IN THE (MILITARY) RANKS

A Russian war against Ukraine seems increasingly likely as time wears on. But the prospect of such a military adventure is beginning to generate pushback from Russian elites and respected statesmen. For instance, General Leonid Ivashov, the influential head of the "All Russian Officers Assembly," a civic group for retired Russian flag officers, has issued a public appeal against the prospective conflict. In his January 31st missive, Ivashov notes that Russia (and before that the USSR) waged just wars "when there was no other way out" and "when the vital interests of the state and society were threatened." Today, by contrast, external threats are "not critical," "strategic stability with NATO is maintained," and Russia's problems "are internal."

According to Ivashov, an attack on Ukraine "will be a challenge to the existence of Russia itself as a state" and "forever make Russians and Ukrainians deadly enemies." The consequences for Russia, he also warns, are potentially dire: with the international community coming together to brand Russia as a threat to international peace and security and roll back its sovereignty. Ivashov also notes that local politics and plummeting popularity are driving Russian President Vladimir Putin's decisionmaking to instigate a conflict, and argues that the Russian people should "refuse [the] criminal policy of provocation of war." (*Radio Svoboda*, February 6, 2022)