



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

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**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Warfare; NATO; Russia; Ukraine

[EDITORS' NOTE: Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine continues, and has grown in both intensity and geopolitical importance – both to Russia itself and to the international community at large. As a result, the *Russia Reform Monitor* will be focusing its coverage principally on military, strategic and political developments relating to the conflict for its duration.]

## RUMBLINGS OF A WIDER WAR

A major blow to Russian war plans came in the opening days of the current conflict, when the Central Asian nation of Kazakhstan – which Russia had recently helped avert a presumptive coup against sitting president Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – refused to provide reinforcements for the Russian war effort. However, Moscow may soon secure assistance from another source: the regime of Alexander Lukashenko in Belarus. The government in Minsk announced on March 1st that it was sending additional troops to reinforce the country's common border with Ukraine. The Belarussian detachment, a total of five tactical battle groups, has fanned worries in the West about Minsk actively joining the fighting.

For their part, Ukrainian officials say it already has. On March 1st, Ukraine's parliament, the Rada, said that Belarussian troops had been spotted in the Cherniv region, on the Ukrainian side of the common border between the two countries. Pentagon officials, however, have said that they do not – as yet – see evidence of an active Belarussian military advance into Ukraine.

If Minsk does enter the fray, it could greatly complicate – and escalate – the fighting, and potentially not only on the territory of Ukraine. Western fears of a larger conflict were further stoked on March 1st, when Belarussian president Alexander Lukashenko was filmed addressing his country's national security council in front of a map purportedly showing military and infrastructure targets in Ukraine as well as in Transdnier, a breakaway region in neighboring Moldova. (*NBC News*, February 25, 2022; *The Daily Beast*, March 1, 2022; *The Hill*, March 1, 2022; Agence France Presse, March 2, 2022)

## A CORPORATE EXODUS...

Since the start of the fighting on February 24th, a growing list of international corporations have signaled their intention to sever ties with Russia. Energy firms have been prominent in this regard. British energy juggernaut BP, for instance, has announced that it will sell its existing shares in Russian state energy firm ROSNEFT. Shell subsequently announced that it will cut ties with GAZPROM, Russia's state natural gas conglomerate, and will sell its stake in the Sakhalin II liquefied natural gas project and other ventures in Russia's Far East. French multinational TotalEnergies, meanwhile, has signaled that it would "no longer provide capital for new projects in Russia."

But energy firms are not the only companies now eyeing an exit from the Russian market. Aerospace giants Airbus and Boeing have likewise announced that they have cut their ties to Russia as a result of the war. And in a move that represents a major symbolic blow to the status and connectivity of ordinary Russians, tech colossus Apple has announced that it is suspending sales of its products within the Russian Federation. Cumulatively, these and similar moves by a growing list of other companies and retailers have exacerbated the crisis now gripping Russia's economy as a result of intensifying Western sanctions. (*NPR*, March 1, 2022; *CNN*, March 1, 2022; *BBC*, March 2, 2022)

## ...AND A TIGHTENING DOMESTIC CLIMATE

As noted in prior issues of the *Russia Reform Monitor*, Putin's war plans against Ukraine have been far from popular with the general Russian populace. They have become even less so in recent days, as a result of the lackluster performance of the Russian military and the unified — and intensifying — opposition from Western nations to Russia's actions. Over the past several days, widespread protests against the war have broken out on the streets of Moscow, St. Petersburg, and other major cities – leading to a crackdown by Russian security forces which, as of March 2nd, totaled "more than 6,500 arrests."

More repression is likely. In the wake of the Council of Europe's February 25th decision to suspend Russia's membership in the political bloc, former Prime Minister (and current Deputy Chairman of the Russian Security Council) Dmitry Medvedev pledged to rescind the country's current moratorium on the death penalty. The Council's decision represents a "good opportunity to restore a number of important institutions to prevent especially serious crimes, such as the death penalty for the most dangerous criminals," Medvedev said in a statement that was clearly intended as a signal to political opponents that their dissent could potentially carry the highest cost.

Russia is also moving against domestic media sources in an attempt to squelch coverage of the war effort that doesn't toe the official Kremlin line. For instance, the official Russian state censor, ROSKOMNADZOR, has launched an investigation into the "dissemination of unreliable publicly significant information" regarding the conflict in Ukraine, while broadcasts from liberal news channels like *Ekho Moskvy* have been blacked out within the country. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 25, 2022; *Newsweek*, February 26, 2022; *The Barents Observer*, February 26, 2022; Associated Press, March 1, 2022; *The Independent*, March 2, 2022)