



AMERICAN FOREIGN  
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RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2518

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**Related Categories:** Europe Military; International Economics and Trade; Warfare; Middle East; Russia; Ukraine

## **THE HIGH COST OF NEGOTIATING WITH RUSSIA**

Recent peace talks between Russia and Ukraine took an unexpected turn. Three negotiators in a recent round of negotiations designed to bring an end to the current conflict have experienced debilitating illness – symptoms that many have attributed to intentional poisoning. The individuals, including Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich, experienced "sore eyes and peeling skin," the *BBC* has reported. Some have contended that the incident, which is believed to have taken place on March 3rd, was orchestrated by "hardliners" in Russia who do not want to see an end to the conflict. (*BBC*, March 29, 2022)

## **FINANCIAL INSTITUTIONS TAKE STOCK OF RUSSIAN CLIENTS**

The economic exodus from Russia continues. Banking powerhouse HSBC is the latest entity to begin "shunning" potential Russian clients and refusing credit to existing ones, reports Reuters. The move comes as part of the bank's stated plan to wind down its business in Russia in the aftermath of the Kremlin's late-February invasion of Ukraine. In mid-March, HSBC announced that it was "not accepting any new business in Russia." The latest steps are expected to have a significant impact, owing to HSBC's status as Europe's second largest bank. (Reuters, March 25, 2022)

## **REINFORCING THE UKRAINIAN FRONT...**

As its campaign in Ukraine has run into unforeseen difficulties, Moscow has begun to alter its military posture elsewhere to shore up its newest war effort. "Russia began a redeployment of Wagner private military contractor (PMC) units and their Syrian proxies from Africa and Syria to Ukraine in early February," write Jennifer Cafarella, Ezgi Yazici, and Zach Coles in a new analysis for the Institute for the Study of War. For instance, they note, "Russia is attempting to redeploy Syrian units with experience working under Russian commanders to Ukraine to mitigate high Russian casualties." It is doing so for obvious reasons. "Syria represents the largest single pool of experienced foreign fighters that Russia can draw from to generate additional combat power relatively quickly. The pool includes Syrians currently serving alongside Russian PMCs like the Wagner group, including abroad, or in Russian-backed Syrian militias. It also includes Syrians with prior experience in such units that could be remobilized. Initial reporting indicates Russia is likely taking a phased approach to mobilizing Russian and Syrian reinforcements from the Middle East and Africa in order to generate multiple waves of reinforcements."

Russia is also reconfiguring its forces in Africa. "Libyan media sources began reporting the redeployment of Wagner Group units along with their Pantsir air-defense systems and Syrian proxies in early February, with later reports appearing to corroborate this redeployment in early March," the authors note. "British military intelligence said on March 28 that more than 1,000 Wagner militants and senior leaders will deploy to eastern Ukraine." (Institute for the Study of War, March 31, 2022)

## **...AND REPLENISHING THE MILITARY RANKS**

At home, meanwhile, Moscow is moving to beef up its dwindling military ranks. In late March, Russian president Vladimir Putin signed a new decree conscripting some 134,500 new soldiers into the country's armed forces as part of the annual spring draft. Officially, these new troops won't be deployed to any "hot spots," Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu has said. However, Russian conscripts have been sent to the Ukrainian front in the past, something the Kremlin has been forced to admit.

Conscripts may not be the only way Moscow plans to replenish the ranks of its military in the face of unexpected battlefield losses, however. Ukraine's main intelligence service has alleged that – parallel to its scheduled Spring draft – the Kremlin has begun recruiting convicts from Chechnya's notorious Chernokozovo penal colony to serve in the military. The service claims that "100 prisoners with serious criminal convictions — including robbery, murder and drug trafficking — have been promised full amnesty in exchange for enlistment, and if they returned alive from the war," reports the *Jerusalem Post*. (*Jerusalem Post*, March 29, 2022; Reuters, March 31, 2022)

## **HOW RUSSIA IS TERRAFORMING UKRAINE**

Russian forces have begun "forcibly relocating" thousands of Ukrainian civilians from the strategic port city of Mariupol as part of the Kremlin's ongoing military campaign in the country. Civilians report being registered, interrogated and then taken to "filtration camps," from where they were transported into Russian territory. Russian news sources have reported that just one such "filtration camp," located in Bezymenne in eastern Ukraine, had processed 5,000 such forced evacuees as of late March. (*Washington Post*, March 30, 2022)

