



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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July 6, 2022 **Ilan I. Berman, Oreet Zimand**

**Related Categories:** Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Warfare; Russia; Ukraine

### THE CHECHEN FACTOR IN THE UKRAINE WAR

In Chechnya, the North Caucasus Russian republic which has been the target of two wars waged by the Kremlin, responses to Russian President Vladimir Putin's current "special operation" in Ukraine have varied widely. At the front lines, reports are emerging of Chechen militias with a "sinister reputation" that are fighting alongside Russian troops. These forces, known as "Kadyrovites" because of their loyalty to Kremlin-backed Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, represent a notable supplement to conventional Russian forces, numbering some 8,000 strong. At the same time, however, some members of the Chechen diaspora have taken up arms against Russia, which they see as a common enemy of both Ukraine and Chechnya.

Such a development is familiar. Though never officially a part of the Ukrainian army, Chechen refugees and dissidents formed the "Sheikh Mansoor Battalion" following the Kremlin's 2014 annexation of the Crimean Peninsula to fight against Russia in the Donbass. Today, "several hundred" Chechen men are said to have joined the conflict on the Ukrainian side. (*Radio France International*, June 20, 2022)

### IKEA EYES THE EXITS

As the war in Ukraine drags on, more and more international companies are moving to disengage from the Russian Federation permanently. The latest one to do so is IKEA, the Swedish furniture giant, which temporarily suspended its operations in Russia and Belarus back in March. The firm announced on June 22nd that it would be permanently closing over one third of the 26 stores it operates in Russia. Commercial real estate sources have told Russian news outlet *Vedemosti* that "IKEA has notified landlords at 10 Moscow shopping malls that it will terminate its lease agreements before they expire." The closures carry a high human cost. IKEA is "expected to lay off at least half of its 15,000 Russia-based employees by the end of the summer," *The Moscow Times* reports. (*The Moscow Times*, June 22, 2022)

### MORE PROOF OF PUTIN'S CORRUPTION

In 2021, imprisoned anti-corruption crusader Alexei Navalny sparked widespread anti-Putin protests with the release of "Putin's Palace," a two-hour video investigation allegedly exploring Putin's unimaginably lavish Black Sea retreat in Sochi, which is said to be complete with vineyards and an "aqua-discotheque." At the time, the Russian President denied any connection to the property, but rumors continue to circulate about his incredible, hidden wealth. A new investigation by the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project and the independent news website *Meduza* has fanned speculation on this front, discovering that "86 apparently unconnected companies and non-profits that appear to hold over \$4.5bn (£3.7bn) of assets," all use a common email domain, LLCinvest.ru. This is the first proof of a connection between these assets, including the Black Sea property discussed in Navalny's video, which have all been rumored to belong to Putin. The report found that Putin is likely connected to these holdings, given that the LLCinvest.ru domain name is owned by a company with close ties to Bank Rossiya, described by the U.S. Treasury Department as "the personal bank for senior officials of the Russian Federation." (*Guardian*, June 20, 2022)

### CYBER-TARGET: LITHUANIA

On June 27th, an avalanche of distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks targeted Lithuanian internet services in response to the Baltic country's announcement that it would no longer allow the shipment of sanctioned goods from Russia to the enclave of Kaliningrad via its territory. According to the Lithuanian government, the DDoS attacks – which were perpetrated by pro-Russia threat group Killnet – successfully disrupted the Secure National Data Transfer Network, "one of the critical components of Lithuania's strategy on ensuring national security in cyberspace... built to be operational during crises or war to ensure the continuity of activity of critical institutions." (*Ars Technica*, June 27, 2022)

## **PUTIN'S MANPOWER PROBLEM**

At the outset of the Ukraine war, Kremlin officials assumed that their invasion would be successful in a matter of days. However, as Russia's "special operation" drags on into its sixth month and casualties continue to rise, the Kremlin is facing an alarming deficit of manpower, even as Russian civilians are unprepared to take on the sacrifices of a full-scale war. As a result, the Russian government is resorting to innovative strategies in order to sustain and bolster its war effort. The country's military, for instance, is recruiting heavily from the underprivileged and ethnically distinct republics in the North Caucasus, including Chechnya, Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kalmykia. Offering financial incentives and then entrapping recruits with misleading contracts, the Russian military is replenishing its ranks by forming these recruits into units that divided along ethnic lines. According to Denis Sokolov, an expert on the North Caucasus at the Free Russia Foundation, the Kremlin is organizing its troops by ethnicity "to tie reputation to the effectiveness of military operations," in order to increase their motivation to fight. It is doing so "because [many within the Russian forces] do not have the motivation to fight right now."

Any benefits these new recruits might bring, however, are offset by the fact that, in many cases, they are deployed to the front lines without the requisite four months of training. According to human rights activist Mikhail Savva, "Such formations are poorly controlled and poorly disciplined." And because they are, "They pose a threat not only to the civilian population of Ukraine but also to other units of the Russian Army." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 26, 2022)