



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Warfare; Israel; Russia

THE RETURN OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION

With the outbreak of the Ukraine war this spring, one of Russia's most potent "soft power" weapons – its harnessing of disinformation and propaganda – has begun to be addressed in earnest by Western capitals. But Russia's disinformation offensive is adapting as well, harnessing new tactics and tropes to influence, in particular, Eastern European audiences. Among the methods being used by the Kremlin to sow political dissension and strife has been the payment of journalists, analysts and commentators to spread pro-Russian content online. The Russian government is also stoking fears about refugees fleeing from the war, and shifting the global blame for rising energy costs away from itself. Russia's new disinformation push has reportedly focused on countries like Bulgaria and Poland, where its narratives have resonated because of what Graham Brookie of the Atlantic Council has explained as "more weaponization of domestic discourse" and "more polarized media markets." (Associated Press, July 15, 2022)

JERUSALEM WEIGHS IN WITH THE KREMLIN

Relations between Israel and Russia continue to deteriorate amid mounting pressure from the Kremlin on the Jewish Agency, the Israeli body that serves as its *de facto* absorption ministry for foreign Jewry. Russia's government had previously threatened to ban the activities of the Agency inside its territory, effectively ending the possibility of immigration to Israel for Russian Jews still in the country and desiring to leave. The governmental decision prompted the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to weigh in officially, with Israeli Ambassador to Russia Alexander Ben Zvi meeting with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov to plead for the Agency to continue its functioning on Russian soil. (*Times of Israel*, July 21, 2022)

RUSSIA'S CONVICT ARMY

As the war in Ukraine has dragged on, Moscow has found it more and more difficult to field forces for its military offensive, forcing it to resort to increasingly creative means to replenish the ranks of its armed forces. One such method has been the conscription of convicts and prisoners to fight on behalf of the Russian state, an investigation by the website *Important Stories* has found. Beginning in the Spring, the investigation found, advertisements for military service specifically targeted at prisoners began appearing on social media apps like Telegram. Russian authorities and representatives of the Wagner paramilitary group also visited penal colonies in places like St. Petersburg, Mordovia, Adygea, Komi, Krasnodar Krai, Leningrad, Nizhny Novgorod and Voronezh to recruit those currently serving time behind bars. Those prisoners with prior military service or experience were given priority in the recruitment drive, as were violent offenders such as murderers.

The terms of the deals these convicts are offered are clear – and compelling. "The conditions are about the same everywhere: the term is six months, payment - plus or minus 200 thousand rubles per month, for a serious wound - 300 thousand, for death - to relatives 5 million rubles," the study details. "They warn that few will survive, but if they survive, there will be an amnesty." It is not as yet clear how many prisoners have been recruited in this fashion, however. (*Important Stories*, July 20, 2022)

THE TRUE STATE OF RUSSIA'S ECONOMY

In response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine more than five months ago, the United States and Europe leveled an unprecedented array of sanctions designed to ratchet up the costs associated with the Kremlin's aggression. The effectiveness of those measures, however, has been the source of some controversy, with Russian officials pointing to a rebounding ruble and the overall integrity of the Russian economy as proof that the country, though not thriving, is nonetheless surviving Western pressure.

The true state of affairs, however, is considerably more grim, according to a new study by Yale University's School of Management. The Russian economy has been "catastrophically crippled" by the cumulative impact of Western sanctions and the departure of thousands of international firms, the report asserts. "Russia has lost companies representing ~40% of its GDP, reversing nearly all of three decades worth of foreign investment," it states. Moreover, sanctions have "irrevocably deteriorated" Russia's exports, while imports into the country from abroad have "largely collapsed," say authors Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, Steven Tian, Franek Sokolowski, Michal Wyrebkowski and Mateusz Kasprowicz.

"Despite Putin's delusions of self-sufficiency and import substitution, Russian domestic production has come to a complete standstill with no capacity to replace lost businesses, products and talent; the hollowing out of Russia's domestic innovation and production base has led to soaring prices and consumer angst," the Yale study outlines. "Russia's strategic positioning as a commodities exporter has irrevocably deteriorated, as it now deals from a position of weakness with the loss of its erstwhile main markets, and faces steep challenges executing a 'pivot to Asia' with non-fungible exports such as piped gas."

"There is no path out of economic oblivion for Russia as long as the allied countries remain unified in maintaining and increasing sanctions pressure against Russia," the authors conclude. "By any metric and on any level, the Russian economy is reeling, and now is not the time to step on the brakes." (*EuroNews*, July 29, 2022)