



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2533

August 17, 2022 **Ilan I. Berman, Oreet Zimand**

**Related Categories:** Warfare; NATO; Resource Security; Russia; Turkey; Ukraine

### MOSCOW'S POLITICAL POWER PLAY

While Ukraine's military counteroffensive chips away at Russia's hold on the occupied regional capital of Kherson, Russian authorities are stepping up their political efforts – signaling plans to hold referendums on annexation in occupied Kherson and Zaporizhzhia on September 11th alongside previously scheduled regional elections. The Kremlin is unlikely to be deterred by the international community's refusal to recognize these votes and subsequent annexations, or by the White House's vague threats that "sham" referendums will result in "additional costs" for Russia. If Moscow proceeds with the planned stage-managed votes, recognized or not, it will solidify Russia's hold on the region, erasing any possibility to negotiate a peaceful withdrawal and instead making decisive military victory the country's only option. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has stated emphatically that annexing territory would end the possibility of future negotiations with Russia. (*Washington Post*, August 8, 2022)

### A TURNAROUND IN TURKEY?

Since the Kremlin began its war on Ukraine, Ankara's condemnation of Russian actions and support for Ukrainian forces in the form of weapons and funding have bolstered the efforts of other NATO members. But Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has deftly maneuvered to engage both Kyiv and Moscow. In July, for instance, Turkey seized Russian ships carrying stolen grain out of Ukraine, only to send those ships back to Russia despite strong opposition from Kyiv. And now, relations between Russia and Turkey seem to be improving. Erdogan has reportedly boasted that, when he and Putin met in July in Tehran, the Russian president expressed interest in establishing a production facility in Russia for the Turkish drone company Baykar. Representatives for Baykar subsequently denied such a project was possible, but Erdogan has shown continued willingness to continue cooperation with Russia in other fields.

Earlier this month, the Turkish president met with Putin at the resort town of Sochi to discuss the possibility of Russia's state-owned nuclear agency, ROSATOM, building two new nuclear plants in Turkey (ROSATOM previously built one in 2018). Erdogan also announced that Turkey, which relies heavily on Russia to fulfill its energy needs, will comply with the Kremlin's insistence that its clients pay for some of their gas imports in rubles. To boot, *Bloomberg* has reported that five Turkish banks have begun using Russia's Mir system, allowing Russians who lost access to Mastercard and Visa services as a result of international sanctions to pay for their purchases via Turkey. This has heightened concerns among U.S. officials that Turkey could become a shelter for Russians trying to skirt sanctions. It has also made Turkey itself a potential sanctions target; according to the *Financial Times*, some Western officials have begun considering punitive actions for Turkey, including "asking companies to reduce financing to Turkish firms" in order to bring Ankara back in line. No official talks on the matter have as yet taken place, however. (*Business Insider*, August 8, 2022)

### LANGUAGE AS A BATTLEFIELD

During the Soviet era, widespread discrimination against Ukrainian speakers relegated use of that language to rural outposts or private conversations in the home. Even after Ukraine's independence in 1989, most national news outlets in the country wrote and broadcasted in Russian, and Russian remained the language of public discourse. The issue of language has consequently become one of the most significant hot button social issues in Ukraine – and a bone of contention between it and Russia. Indeed, among the rationales cited by Vladimir Putin for his "special military operation" back in February was a 2019 law by Ukraine's Verkhovna Rada designed to "ensure the functioning of the Ukrainian language as the state language" – a measure that Putin contended was discriminatory toward Russian speakers in Ukraine.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, a fight over language and cultural identity has intensified in parallel to Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression, with the country's population mobilizing in defense of their national language. In occupied parts of the Donbass, Russian forces have been replacing Ukrainian street signs with Russian ones and ending the use of Ukrainian language textbooks in schools. But Ukrainians are pushing back; according to one March 2022 survey, 76% of Ukrainians now consider Ukrainian to be their native tongue, up from 57% in 2012. And people like Svitlana Lukach, a professor of Ukrainian who teaches a popular free language course at a Kyiv bookstore, explain that switching from speaking Russian to Ukrainian is now likened to a patriotic duty. "I'm not able to fight on the front line, so I do my part like this instead," Lukach has said. (*Wall Street Journal*, August 6, 2022)

## **ANOTHER REASON THE KREMLIN COVETS UKRAINE**

At war with Ukraine's people, language, and culture, Russia is also fighting for control of the country's valuable natural resource deposits. And if Ukraine ends up making territorial concessions to Russia in order to end the current conflict, the Kremlin could end up being significantly enriched. At stake are the territories in the Donbass currently occupied by Russia, which the Kremlin is already moving to annex via a planned referendum in September. "If the Kremlin succeeds in annexing Ukrainian land seized during Russia's invasion, Kyiv would permanently lose almost two-thirds of its deposits," worth at least \$12.4 trillion in total and including "63% of Ukraine's coal deposits, 11% of its oil, 20% of its natural gas, 42% of its metals, and 33% of its rare earths," notes one analysis.

That outcome is deliberate. Ever since its invasion of Ukraine in February, Russia's forces have pursued control of the resources that form the country's economic backbone, seizing 41 coal fields, 27 natural gas sites, 14 propane sites, nine oil fields, six iron ore deposits, and several sites used to mine for titanium, zirconium, strontium, lithium, uranium, and gold. While Ukraine still has control over most of its oil and gas reserves, its past status as a major global source of fossil fuels, like its status as a top grain exporter, is being mortally threatened by the Kremlin's current war. (*Business Insider*, August 11, 2022)