



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2537

September 29, 2022 **Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor**

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

RUSSIANS FLEE PUTIN'S WAR

According to new data released by ROSSTAT, Russia's state statistics agency, out-migration from Russia has surged since the start of the war against Ukraine in February. During the first six months of 2022, approximately 419,000 people left Russia – twice as many as the same six-month period a year earlier. Additionally, according to ROSSTAT, in the first half of this year Russia saw a net outflow of 73,000 people to countries in the former Soviet Union, reversing a trend which saw the net influx of Central Asians and Caucasians entering Russia. (*Meduza*, September 6, 2022)

[EDITORS' NOTE: These statistics, along with the chronic "brain drain" of recent years (which have seen intellectual and scientific classes exit Russia *en masse*) and consistently low birth rates, are exceedingly bad news for the health of the Russian population. Even before the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, the Kremlin had resorted to extensive measures – such as offering Russian citizenship to ethnic Russians in other countries – in order to combat population decline. But the Ukraine war – by all measures, an extraordinarily unpopular conflict – has accelerated the country's adverse population trends, perhaps significantly so.]

A RUSSIAN WEAPON OF WAR: FILTRATION

Russia is engaging in the "filtration" of Ukrainians in what represents a step toward the outright annexation of more Ukrainian territory, United Nations officials have warned. "In cases that our office has documented, during 'filtration,' Russian armed forces and affiliated armed groups have subjected persons to body searches, sometimes involving forced nudity, and detailed interrogations about the personal background, family ties, political views and allegiances of the individual concerned," Ilze Brands Kehris, the UN's assistant secretary-general for human rights, has told the body's Security Council.

Filtration, according to the UN, has several aspects to it, all of which aim to subjugate and dehumanize the target group – in this case, Ukrainians. Those deemed a threat because of their views or personal ties have subsequently been "arbitrarily detained, tortured or disappeared." Even more disturbingly, Ukrainian authorities and allied governments have reported instances of the forcible transfer of Ukrainian children into Russia. "The goal is to change sentiments by force," the U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, has explained. "To provide a fraudulent veneer of legitimacy for the Russian occupation and eventual, purported annexation of even more Ukrainian territory." (*VOA News*, September 7, 2022)

WAGNER, DEPLETED

Russia may not be able to rely on the Wagner Group, its most (in)famous mercenary contingent, for much longer. Wagner, which is headed by Russian oligarch and Putin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, has in the past operated in key conflict zones as a proxy of the Kremlin. The group was notably active in Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and has maintained a presence on Ukrainian soil (in places like the Donbas) since then. It has also helped Russia further its geostrategic objectives in foreign locales, like the DRC, where the Russian government has sought to maintain a measure of plausible deniability. But the current war in Ukraine has seen Wagner's mercenaries assume a prominent role as front-line forces reinforcing Russia's military. As a result, observers say, the mercenary outfit's ranks have sustained significant casualties – and the group is being forced to adapt as a result.

According to British intelligence sources, Wagner is now lowering its recruitment standards and training sophistication as it struggles to replenish its ranks. "Very limited training is made available to new recruits," the British Ministry of Defense laid out in a recent assessment. In turn, that dynamic "will highly likely impact on the future operational effectiveness of the group and will reduce its value as a prop to the regular Russian forces." (*Business Insider*, September 11, 2022)

ZELENSKY'S APPEAL

On September 16th, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky appeared virtually in front of the UN General Assembly in a pre-recorded speech in which he urged UN member countries to continue to send weapons and supplies to Ukraine to help his country repel Russia's aggression. The speech was an anomaly of sorts; normal procedure requires heads of state and government to deliver their addresses in person, so Zelensky's request for a virtual platform had been put to a vote. However, the request was approved overwhelmingly by 101 member states, with 19 abstentions and only 7 "no" votes – from Belarus, Cuba, Eritrea, Nicaragua, North Korea, Syria and, of course, Russia. The speech included several concrete requests for policy changes, including the imposition of price caps on Russian energy, the removal of Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council, and the conviction that "Russia should pay for this war with its assets." (Associated Press, September 16, 2022; *New York Times*, September 21, 2022)