



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2546

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**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Warfare; NATO; Border Security; Africa; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

### AFGHANS CONTEMPLATE FIGHTING FOR THE ENEMY

As its Ukraine campaign drags on, and as battlefield losses continue to mount, the Kremlin is looking farther and farther afield for reinforcements. Its latest target of recruitment? Afghan commandos. The August 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan catapulted the radical Taliban movement back to power in Kabul. It also set the stage for a wave of bloody retributions against Afghan soldiers who had been trained by U.S. and other Western militaries, most of whom were not evacuated as part of the U.S. exit and consequently were left with "no country, no jobs, and no future." This cohort has become an inviting target for Russian recruiters, including those from the Wagner Group, who have reached out via social media platforms in an attempt to build what some experts have referred to as a "Russian foreign legion" to be deployed in Ukraine.

For Afghanistan's abandoned soldiers, the situation presents a dire – and undesirable – choice. "They'd be better used by Western allies to fight alongside Ukrainians. They don't want to fight for the Russians; the Russians are the enemy," notes one former Afghan official. "But what else are they going to do?" (*Foreign Policy*, October 25, 2022)

### PENTAGON: RUSSIA AN "ACUTE" THREAT TO THE HOMELAND

With its nuclear brinksmanship and eroding military position, the government of Russian President Vladimir Putin represents an "acute" threat to the United States, military officials have asserted. In its new *National Defense Strategy*, released late last month, the Pentagon warned of the potential for Russia to lash out – including, potentially, with nuclear weapons – in an effort to secure some sort of strategic victory in its current war. "Even as the PRC (People's Republic of China) poses the Department's pacing challenge, recent events underscore the acute threat posed by Russia," the report reads. "Contemptuous of its neighbors' independence, Russia's government seeks to use force to impose border changes and to reimpose an imperial sphere of influence. Its extensive track record of territorial aggression includes the escalation of its brutal, unprovoked war in Ukraine."

The course of that conflict, meanwhile, is making Russia more volatile. "Although its leaders' political and military actions intended to fracture NATO have backfired dramatically, the goal remains. Russia presents serious, continuing risks in key areas. These include nuclear threats to the homeland and U.S. Allies and partners; long-range cruise missile threats; cyber and information operations; counterspace threats; chemical and biological weapons (CBW); undersea warfare; and extensive gray zone campaigns targeted against democracies in particular. Russia has incorporated these capabilities and methods into an overall strategy that, like the PRC's, seeks to exploit advantages in geography and time backed by a mix of threats to the U.S. homeland and to our Allies and partners." (U.S. Department of Defense, October 27, 2022)

### MOSCOW'S SUBVERSION IMPERILS MOLDOVA

Ever since the start of Russia's current war in Ukraine in February, worries have mounted among nearby states that they might become Moscow's next targets – either militarily or politically. The former Soviet republic of Moldova, a portion of which is already claimed by Russia, feels especially vulnerable, with its officials seeing themselves as an "easier target" than Ukraine, and particularly at risk now that, as a result of lackluster military performance, Moscow needs "success somewhere." In the case of Moldova, they say, the Kremlin has relied heavily on infiltration campaigns into Chisinau's political system to promote pro-Moscow candidates. "[T]he Russians are very good at exporting two things: one, energy, and the second, corruption," one senior Moldovan security official has told the *Washington Post*. Russia's most recent efforts rely on combining those two "exports" to destabilize the Moldovan government: both by increasing the price of fuel in Moldova and by mobilizing supporters of the Moldovan political party Sor, headed by a pro-Russian Moldovan oligarch, against the country's sitting pro-Western government. (*Washington Post*, October 28, 2022)

## THE RUSSIAN ASAT THREAT

The Kremlin may be dialing down its talk of potential nuclear weapons usage, but Russian officials are now eyeing a new vulnerability in the West: commercial satellites. In recent comments before the United Nations, a senior Russian official asserted that his government views commercial satellites that are assisting Ukraine in resisting Russian aggression as "a legitimate target for retaliation." Russia's history with anti-satellite (ASAT) weapons stretches back to the 1960s, when the Soviet Union began to develop a number of satellite interception systems to counter U.S. capabilities. Since the fall of the USSR, Russia has continued this focus, and in 2021 it destroyed an aging Soviet satellite in a test that created significant risks to the International Space Station.

The Biden administration has reacted strongly to the threat. "Any attack on U.S. infrastructure will be met with an appropriate response in an appropriate way," National Security Council spokesman John Kirby has told reporters. "And we're going to continue to pursue all means to expose, deter and hold Russia accountable for any such attack should it occur." Kirby did not, however, elaborate on what an American response to Russian targeting of Western satellites might entail. (*Fox News*, October 28, 2022)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Russia's potential targeting of commercial satellites represents a notable threat to commercial firms such as SpaceX, whose Starlink satellite network has been working to provide internet capabilities to Ukrainians despite infrastructure and connectivity disruptions caused by the Russian invasion.]