



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

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Related Categories: Energy Security; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Latin America; Russia; Ukraine

UKRAINE BRACES FOR A NEW OFFENSIVE

Despite its lackluster military performance to date, Russia is showing no signs of giving up its fight in Ukraine. To the contrary, officials in Kyiv are warning that the Kremlin will soon double down on its efforts to take over their country. Moscow's continued efforts to procure arms from Iran, as well as statements made by Russian commentators, they say, suggest "that the Kremlin sees no way of retreating from the conflict." Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov has noted that approximately half of the 300,000 conscripts pressed into service as part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's Fall "partial mobilization" order are now being prepared for a future offensive – one that his government believes will begin in late January or early February of next year. (*Guardian*, December 15, 2022)

RUSSIA SEEKS AN ALTERNATIVE IN THE AMERICAS...

As Western countries move to put price caps on Russian oil – or ban the purchase of it altogether – Moscow is seeking other markets to compensate. South America looms large in the Kremlin's calculus. Following a recent meeting in Caracas with Venezuela's oil minister, Russian deputy prime minister Alexander Novak has announced that Russia would be working to "[increase] oil output as part of projects in Venezuela."

The news is not surprising. The regime of Venezuelan strongman Nicolas Maduro has been an ally of the Kremlin for some time. The two countries enjoy extensive economic and political ties, as well as a shared anti-American ideology. Kremlin-linked mercenaries were even said to have been dispatched to Venezuela amid opposition protests several years ago. Nevertheless, the Russian government's impending expansion of energy cooperation with Venezuela reflects how Moscow is becoming progressively squeezed out of global energy markets as a result of pressure from the United States and Europe. (Reuters, December 15, 2022)

...AND FORMULATES AN ANSWER TO THE WEST'S PRICE CAP

Russia is not just seeking out alternative markets for its energy exports, however. Officials in Moscow are striking back at Western restrictions on its oil sales. In the wake of an early-December G7 motion to impose a cap on the per barrel price of Russian oil, the Kremlin has announced that it will no longer sell crude to any nation that adopts the measure. (*Wall Street Journal*, December 27, 2022)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Russia's declaration is an obvious attempt to disrupt European and American plans to diminish the Kremlin's revenue from energy sales, and thereby to further hamper its war effort in Ukraine. However, it will also have a pronounced practical effect, making Moscow increasingly reliant on consumers such as China, India and Turkey, all of whom have rushed to take advantage of the shrinking market available to Russian energy firms.]

MOSCOW CONSPIRES TO KEEP ITS NEW TERRITORIES WEAK

Russia may have unilaterally annexed the provinces of Zaporizhzhie, Kherson, and the self-declared Donetsk and Luhansk National Republics as part of its ongoing war on Ukraine, but that doesn't mean it trusts the people living in them. To the contrary, the Kremlin sees the citizens of those oblasts as a potential security threat – and is moving quickly to disarm them. A new draft bill that is expected to be introduced in the Duma as soon as the chamber reconvenes in January will take aim at gun possession by residents of all four regions. Specifically, notes Paul Goble, "the draft bill orders that anyone in these territories reregister guns over the next year. Failure to do so will prevent owners from purchasing ammunition and may result in fines or other penalties. Anyone who doesn't reregister weapons will likely have them confiscated with or without compensation."

"The fact that such a measure has been prepared highlights a problem few outsiders have focused on: the civilian population in these regions is in many cases heavily armed," Goble explains, drawing from reporting by *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*. "Not surprisingly, Russian officials want to change that both to increase their control and limit the flow of weapons into the Russian Federation." (*Window on Eurasia*, December 22, 2022)