



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2555

January 9, 2023 **Sydney Duckor, Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Warfare; Russia; Ukraine

PUTIN RAMPS UP WARTIME PROPAGANDA

As Russia's war in Ukraine has dragged on, the Kremlin has begun resorting to increasingly active measures to prop up flagging morale among the Russian populace. Russian President Vladimir Putin has reportedly ordered the country's Culture Ministry to begin organizing screenings of "patriotic" documentaries across the nation in a bid to stoke nationalist sentiment among local communities. Under the president's order, the Ministry will prioritize the airing of films about Russia's "struggle against the spread of Neo-Nazi and Neo-fascist ideologies" and other "patriotic" themes that glorify the state. Putin's directive also extends to the creation of "public spaces, art objects, and school museums" dedicated to the Kremlin's "special military operation" in Ukraine, as well as the organization of classroom discussions about the current war. (Meduza, January 3, 2023)

GAMING MOSCOW'S MUNITIONS

How much longer can Russia's offensive in Ukraine last? The answer to that question depends significantly on the sustainability of the Russian military arsenal – and experts estimate that Russia's stocks of sophisticated missiles and precision-guided munitions are running low. According to Vadym Kibitzky, the deputy head of Ukrainian military intelligence, Russia's stocks of weapons like the Kh-101, Kh-55 and Kalibr missiles are dwindling. Estimating that large-scale missile strikes entail "approximately 80 missiles" per attack, Kibitzky believes Moscow only has enough hardware for two or three more "massive attacks" – although it could draw out its stockpiles by carrying out smaller scale, more concentrated and targeted bombings.

That assessment echoes those of U.S. officials. Russia is burning through its stocks of munitions at "an extraordinary rate," and does not have the ability to replenish supplies of sophisticated weaponry on its own, Avril Haines, the U.S. Director of National Intelligence, recently told an audience at the Reagan National Defense Forum in Simi Valley, California. "It's really pretty extraordinary, and our own sense is that they are not capable of indigenously producing what they are expending at this stage," Haines said. "That's why you see them going to other countries, effectively, to try to get ammunition."

European officials, however, are striking a more cautious note. In a December interview with Defense News, Lithuania's Defense Minister, Arvydas Anusaukas, noted that "people in the hotspots, at the frontline, cannot confirm this information [about Russia's looming weapons shortages]. And as far as we know, Russia has sufficient artillery capabilities and ammunition. We're not sure about stocks, but some experts calculate that by spring next year, it may run out of it. We are not sure about their industrial capacity, which would allow for replenishing their stocks, and that's the question." (Military Times, December 12, 2022; Defense News, December 28, 2022; Newsweek, January 4, 2023)

HOW RUSSIA'S ECONOMY WEATHERED THE PAST YEAR

Since the start of the war in Ukraine, Kremlin officials have taken pains to minimize the impact that Western sanctions have had on their country's economy, and to emphasize the resilience of the Russian state in the face of pressure from the U.S. and Europe. That assessment, experts say, is correct – but incomplete. "The Russian economy has survived 2022," Janis Kluge of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs has told The Moscow Times. "But we cannot yet say that it survived the sanctions because they are still unfolding." Specifically, Kluge and other economists note, economic data from 2022 appears misleading because it includes figures from both January and February, prior to the imposition of sanctions stemming from the Kremlin's war in Ukraine, which began in late February.

Moreover, these experts point out, there are telltale indicators that Western sanctions have begun to bite, and Russia's economic future is far from rosy. The head of Russia's central bank announced last month that Russia's GDP would end up contracting just 3% in 2022 – a figure that supporters of the Russian government have cited as proof of the inefficacy of Western economic pressure. But, objectively speaking, such a constriction is nevertheless tantamount to a "colossal recession given that all world economies were expected to grow by 3% or 4% after the coronavirus pandemic," economist Oleg Itskhoki recently noted. (The Moscow Times, January 3, 2023)

ANOTHER MILITARY RESHUFFLE IN MOSCOW

Moscow's ongoing military setbacks in Ukraine have precipitated still more personnel changes, as the Russian government seeks to streamline and optimize its war effort. In the fifth such change, the Kremlin has replaced the head of its Western Group of Forces (WGF) in Ukraine. Col. Gen. Sergei Surovikin, the infamous "Butcher of Syria," who was installed as the head of the WGF in November, has been swapped out, with command now granted to Lieutenant General Yevgeny Nikiforov. Nikiforov is notorious for having previously led the failed Russian attempt to capture Kyiv by the Eastern Group of Forces of the Russian army. (Jerusalem Post, January 2, 2023)