



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2567

March 6, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor, Ian Cameron**

Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Warfare; Corruption; China; Russia; Ukraine

RESCUING RUSSIA'S ANTI-WAR DISSIDENTS

Despite the increasingly repressive nature of the Russian regime, there are still groups willing to help those targeted by the Kremlin's war on its domestic opposition. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year, a variety of underground groups have emerged to help rescue Russians being targeted and repressed by President Vladimir Putin's government. At least five such groups are estimated to currently be operating, assisting dissenters to escape the country and providing them with housing, money, and visas. The groups work from outside of Russia, where they can plan the details of the escapes to countries like Germany, Poland, and Lithuania, all of which have established humanitarian visa programs for Russian dissidents.

These organizations are filling a critical need. Over the course of Russia's war, the number of Russians charged with crimes by the Kremlin has soared, as Russia's government attempts to enforce a rigid interpretation of the nature – and objectives – of its "special military operation" in Ukraine. Large spikes in arrests were registered in March of 2022, immediately following the outbreak of the conflict, and again in September 2022, on the heels of Putin's "partial mobilization" order intended to beef up the ranks of the Russian military. (New York Times, February 14, 2023)

AUTHORITARIAN BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER...

As tensions between the United States and China deepen against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, Moscow and Beijing are tightening their strategic ties in opposition to the West. On February 22nd, Russian President Vladimir Putin met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, when Beijing's top diplomat flew to Moscow on a deeply symbolic state visit. After their consultations, Putin said that the relationship between the two countries was aiming for "new frontiers," while Wang made clear that Sino-Russian ties would "not succumb to pressure from third parties." Putin also used the occasion to confirm that Chinese president Xi Jinping would visit Russia in the near future. (Washington Examiner, February 22, 2023)

[EDITORS' NOTE The visit by Wang reflects a potentially significant change in Chinese strategy. Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China has sought to remain a neutral party, and has consistently called for a peaceful solution to the conflict even as it has signaled its ongoing diplomatic support of Russia. However, Wang's recent state visit to Russia – and Xi's impending one – suggests that China's calculus has changed, and the PRC might now be prepared to back Russia more overtly and fully.]

...AS BEIJING MULLS ARMING MOSCOW

Nor is China's growing support of Russia confined to the political realm. According to CNN, the United States has acquired intelligence indicating that China is considering providing Russia with drones and ammunition for its war effort in Ukraine. While Beijing does not seem to have made a concrete decision yet about doing so, talks between Russia and China regarding the scope and contents of the potential aid are said to be ongoing. (CNN, February 24, 2023)

NOW A MEDIA PARIAS AS WELL

Belatedly, Russia has been kicked out of the world's biggest media confederation. In response to the decision of the Russian Union of Journalists (RUJ) to expand its operations into occupied parts of Ukraine, the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has suspended RUJ's membership. The IFJ's president, Dominique Pradeli, commented that "the Russian Union of Journalists' actions... have clearly shattered this solidarity and sown divisions among sister unions." The IFJ further stated that the organization, which represents as many as 600,000 journalists globally, will continue to try and support independent journalism both inside and outside of Russia. The IFJ's decision was triggered by the withdrawal of Finnish, Norwegian, Danish, and Icelandic journalist unions from the IFJ in protest as a result of its inaction over the RUJ's activities in occupied Ukrainian territory. (The Moscow Times, February 22, 2023)

TENSIONS DEEPEN BETWEEN WAGNER AND RUSSIA'S MILITARY BRASS

Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of Russia's notorious Wagner group, has launched another broadside at Russia's military leadership. In a video uploaded by his press service, Prigozhin accused the Russian military of denying ammunition to his troops. According to Prigozhin, while Russia's wartime production is capable of supplying both the military and Wagner, the country's military leadership is purposefully strangling Wagner's ammunition supply. In recent weeks, Prigozhin has been engaged in an increasingly public rivalry with the various power centers in Moscow – and in particular with the country's Ministry of Defense. (Reuters, February 20, 2023)