



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Military Innovation; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Warfare; Corruption; Russia; Ukraine

CRIMINAL REFORM, RUSSIAN STYLE

Over the past year, as the Kremlin has persecuted its war against Ukraine, social conditions with the country have deteriorated markedly. In addition to growing governmental repression, crime has risen and the number of murders in Russia has gone up for the first time in two decades. But rather than addressing the causes of the growing criminality (through such measures as curtailing access to alcohol and tighter gun control), notes Russia expert Paul Goble in his Window on Eurasia blog, Moscow is responding differently: by lengthening prison sentences. Goble cites Russian journalist Eva Merkacheva as outlining that "Russian courts have increased sentences for all crimes, including non-violent ones, to much more than 15 years, with 18 to 25 years now the norm." Such a step, however, is likely to be deeply counterproductive. It "looks pro-active but does little or nothing to cut the crime rate and may make prisons a breeding ground for more serious crimes," Goble posits. (Window on Eurasia, February 21, 2023)

HOLDING RUSSIA ACCOUNTABLE FOR ATROCITIES

As the Ukraine conflict continues, Western leaders are turning their attention to the question of transnational justice – and setting their sights on the future composition of the Kremlin. At the recent Munich Security Conference, Vice President Kamala Harris announced that the Biden administration has made the determination that Russia has committed crimes against humanity in its war against Ukraine. "We have examined the evidence, we know the legal standards, and there is no doubt: These are crimes against humanity," she said. Harris cited cases of "widespread and systemic attack against a civilian population," mass deportation of children, and the torture and execution of civilians as evidence buttressing the U.S. assessment. The same day, Secretary of State Antony Blinken released a statement saying that he had reached the same determination. (Wall Street Journal, February 18, 2023)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The declaration is long on symbolism as a condemnation of Russia's war of aggression against its western neighbor. But it is also significant for policy purposes. Increasingly, Western officials are expressing worries that, whenever and however Vladimir Putin leaves the scene, there will be a rush among foreign governments to return to "business as usual" with the Russian state, without addressing its widespread corruption, repression or deeply-rooted imperial ideology. By pressing for accountability from key Russian decisionmakers and elites, the United States (and its allies are hoping they can sideline at least some of the politicians and power brokers who have enabled the current war against Ukraine from playing a part in Russia's future after the conflict.)]

THE BLOOM IS OFF THE RUSSIAN MILITARY ROSE

Before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, much of the West had been impressed, if not intimidated, by Russia's military modernization efforts. However, the string of failures that has plagued Russia's campaign in Ukraine has raised serious doubts about the actual effectiveness of the country's armed forces. A new analysis published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) reports that Russia has likely lost 40% of its tank fleet since invading Ukraine, and according to IISS director John Chapman, "in its first real combat test... Moscow's armed forces have so far come up short, particularly its ground forces."

The IISS assessment stands in sharp contrast to those being disseminated just a few years ago, when the prevailing perception of the Russian military was that of formidable strength. For instance, the Defense Intelligence Agency's annual review of Russian military power in 2017 underscored that "the Russian military today is on the rise." Russia's continual failures over the past year have also raised serious questions about its political and military leadership, its lower-level military leadership, and its ability to manage tactical and logistical tasks. (Washington Times, February 15, 2023)

WIDENING THE CONSCRIPT POOL

Amid ongoing military maneuvers (and problems) in Ukraine, the Russian government appears to be eyeing ways to increase the size of its armed forces. The UK Ministry of Defense has noted that Russia is likely preparing to raise the age limit of military conscription from 27 to 30. The Ministry based this assessment on recent statements by Andrey Kartapolov, the head of the Russian State Duma's Defense Committee, who indicated that Russia may raise its conscription age just in time for the Spring 2023 draft. This change could potentially allow the Kremlin to attain the 30% increase in the size of Russia's armed forces that Russian President Vladimir Putin announced last year.

Moreover, according to Kartapolov, the change could serve another, more practical, purpose as well. Altering the age criteria for those who could be drafted is likely to be less alarming for the Russian populace as a whole than the announcement of a new national mobilization. This is especially significant given the widespread negative reaction to Putin's "partial mobilization" order back in September, which prompted hundreds of thousands of Russians to flee the country. (Express, January 16, 2023)