



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Europe Military; Warfare; Africa; China; Russia; Ukraine

THE MOUNTING TOLL FROM RUSSIA'S WAR

As Russia pushes to make progress in eastern Ukraine, the casualty rates of its military personnel have skyrocketed. Ukraine's General Staff has estimated that in early February, Russia was suffering casualties at its fastest rate since the first week of the war, with 824 soldiers dying every day. A casualty rate of 824 deaths per day would be approximately four times higher than the average in June-July 2022. These numbers were reported by the British Ministry of Defense, which stated that while it could not verify Ukraine's methodology, "the trends the data illustrate are likely accurate." While Ukraine has suffered high casualties in the conflict as well, Russia's mounting toll likely stems from a range of factors, including lack of trained personnel, coordination, and resources. (*New York Post*, February 12, 2023)

AFTER UKRAINE... BELARUS?

Russia's government may be experiencing unforeseen difficulties in attaining its strategic objectives in Ukraine, but this has not stopped the country's leadership from thinking still bigger. Internal documents from Russian President Vladimir Putin's executive office recently leaked to the press reveal a 2021 plan to gradually increase Russia's control over neighboring Belarus, ending in the formation of a "union state" under Russian control. Under the scheme, Russia would gradually expand its military presence in Belarus, create stronger pro-Russia sentiments, and make it easier for Belarusians to get Russian passports. The plan largely tracks with the methods that Russia has used to date in Ukraine, and envisions Russia having generally completed its creeping takeover of Belarus by 2030. (*Business Insider*, February 21, 2023)

WAGNER PLOTS A COUP IN AFRICA

Russia's preoccupation with Ukraine has not precluded Moscow from carrying out "business as usual" elsewhere in the world, destabilizing governments and stoking pro-Russian sentiment. Africa is no exception in this regard; the United States recently provided Chad's government with intelligence indicating that Russia's Wagner paramilitary group has plans to help rebels overthrow the ruling regime and seize power. The central African nation possesses vast oil deposits and large, if unexplored, mineral resources, and its government has long been close to the West. Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner's founder, also has large-scale business interests throughout the African continent, with other companies owned by him having received contracts to exploit natural resources in countries like the Central African Republic and Sudan. While Wagner has been active across Africa for years, attempting to overthrow a government would mark a new page in its playbook. As Wagner's profile in Africa has risen, the Biden administration and European governments have been urging African governments to cease their cooperation with the outfit. (*Wall Street Journal*, February 23, 2023)

A HELPING HAND FROM THE PRC

Although Beijing has tended to market itself as a neutral party in the Ukraine conflict, China's leaders are inching closer to supplying Russia with lethal military aid. According to a new report from the German magazine *Der Spiegel*, the Russian military and the Chinese drone producer Xi'an Bingo Intelligent Aviation Technology are now negotiating the production of attack drones for use against Ukraine. The negotiations are over the ZT-180 prototype, which is reportedly similar to the Iranian Shahed-136 drones that Russia is already using. The Chinese firm will produce and test the drones before delivering them to Russia as early as this April. Moreover, *Der Spiegel*'s reporting indicates that the Chinese firm Bingo will also deliver UAV parts to Russia and help Russia set up its own domestic production capacity. China has reportedly had plans since last year to support the Russian military, and a company controlled by the Chinese military made plans to deliver Russia replacement parts for Russian jets. (*T-Online*, February 24, 2023)

TAKING STOCK OF MOSCOW'S MILITARY PROGRESS

How is Russia's campaign to occupy Ukraine really faring? Since the start of the war over a year ago, the Kremlin has launched five distinct phases of military operations aimed at "demilitarizing" and "de-Nazifying" Ukraine. But those offensives have suffered from a legion of problems, ranging from poorly resourced troops to overmatch by Ukrainian defenders, resulting in a loss of momentum that continues to this day, resulting in decidedly meager military gains. In fact, a new data investigation by *Novaya Gazeta Europe* suggests, Moscow's troubled military effort has been even less successful than commonly understood in achieving its objectives – which, in turn, have progressively been revised downward. The paper notes that, over the past nine months, "Russia only managed to seize a little over 2,000 square kilometres of territories in bloody clashes, or just 4% of Ukraine's Donetsk and Luhansk regions." In other words, the Russian army has spent the past six months basically "standing in one place."

These setbacks, the paper notes, have prompted the Russian armed forces to change tack, and lean into their war on the Ukrainian people. Russia is spending "increasingly more time on city assaults," and has "flattened" cities as part of its operations to "liberate" them. And the new Russian offensive, launched by the Kremlin a couple of weeks ago, has turned out to be distinctly underwhelming.

Where does all this leave the conflict? According to the paper, time favors Kyiv and not Moscow. "As the war drags on, Russia's technical capabilities are gradually declining," the *Novaya Gazeta* study outlines. "The Kremlin resorts to using increasingly older and outdated weapons on the battlefield. Ukraine's capabilities are improving on the contrary due to Western military aid supplies." None of that, however, means that the war will end any time soon. (*Novaya Gazeta Europe*, February 28, 2023)