



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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PRIGOZHIN'S PARAMILITARY OUTFIT GROOMS A YOUNGER GENERATION

Russia's notorious Wagner paramilitary group has taken center stage in the war in Ukraine, and the organization is now using its newfound fame to target Russia's youth. Wagner recently launched a youth club called Wagneryonok ("Junior Wagnerite"), which aims to instill young Russians with patriotism and prepare them for military service. Wagneryonok holds patriotic events and provides assistance to the families of volunteers who are fighting in Ukraine. The organization's events have featured politicians, pro-war bloggers, and military personnel. Wagneryonok is based out of Wagner's St. Petersburg HQ, and held its first meeting in late January. According to RIA Novosti, the group is open to both boys and girls, and the average age of its members is 18. (The Moscow Times, March 3, 2023)

THE KEY ROLE OF RUSSIA'S YOUNG, WESTERN-TRAINED ELITES

Russian President Vladimir Putin is well-known for his KGB past and his reliance on advisors with similar backgrounds. But as the war in Ukraine drags on, and Western sanctions put pressure on the Russian economy, it appears that he is embracing a new generation of up-and-coming Russian leaders. As the Wall Street Journal notes, Russia's strategy for blunting the impact of Western sanctions has, to a great extent, been designed by younger Russian technocrats with deep knowledge of the West and experience working on Wall Street. Pavel Sorokin, Russia's deputy energy minister, exemplifies this trend. Sorokin and other young technocrats have been instrumental in helping Russia navigate sanctions and reduce their impact on its economy. According to Viktor Katona of commodity-data company Kpler, the West has underestimated this new generation of Western-trained decisionmakers who have been fast-tracked to the upper echelons of power in Moscow. (Wall Street Journal, March 2, 2023)

WAGNER THREATENS TO JEOPARDIZE RUSSIA'S WAR EFFORT

For months now, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of Russia's Wagner group, has been engaging in a public feud with the country's military leadership. That conflict may be coming to a head. Just a day after gleefully boasting about how close Wagner was to victory in Bakhmut, Prigozhin released a four-minute video in which he seemingly threatened to withdraw his fighters from the front. In the video, Prigozhin predicts a series of calamities that will befall the Russian armed forces if Wagner were to withdraw. The basis for the possible withdrawal was the alleged refusal of Russia's military leadership to supply Wagner with weaponry and ammunition.

The feud between Prigozhin and the country's military brass has grown increasingly caustic in recent weeks. Historically, the oligarch – known as "Putin's chef" – has been an ally of the Russian President. However, over the course of the war, real and deepening divisions have become apparent between Prigozhin and key Kremlin decisionmakers, and his status in the country's political pecking order is increasingly uncertain. (The Daily Beast, March 4, 2023)

THE HIGH PRICE OF BAKHMUT

Although Russian forces have made progress toward capturing the eastern Ukrainian city of Bakhmut, they have done so at enormous cost. Russian forces, led by the Wagner group, have been waging a brutal battle for the city since August, and according to NATO estimates, Russia has lost five soldiers for every Ukrainian soldier killed in the fighting. According to the Washington, DC-based Institute for the Study of War, Russia's push for Bakhmut has severely degraded its capacity to conduct further offensive operations in Ukraine – something that will give Kyiv a chance to seize the initiative. Ukrainian forces have also suffered significant losses during the city's defense, but Kyiv has vowed to do everything it can to hold Bakhmut. (The Moscow Times, March 7, 2023)

HOW RUSSIANS VIEW PROTEST AND EMIGRATION

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, hundreds of thousands of its citizens have fled the country – either in protest or to avoid conscription. This is not, however, a course of action endorsed by most of the respondents in a recent poll by the Moscow-based Levada Center. Per the survey, over half of Russians hold a negative view of those who left the country to avoid mobilization. Only ten percent of respondents viewed these emigrants "with understanding." Opinion, however, was much more evenly split as to the proper response to these departures, with slightly less than half of those surveyed supporting proposals by Russian lawmakers to dispossess the property of those who criticize Russia's leadership from abroad. Notably, the responses correlated closely to age, with older respondents tending to view those who departed the country in protest more negatively. (Meduza, March 7, 2023)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Given the chilling effect of Russia's authoritarian political climate on pollsters and respondents alike, especially against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, the results of any public opinion surveys in Russia should be viewed with a high degree of caution.]