



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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SOLOVYOV ADVOCATES SOVIET TACTICS AGAINST UKRAINE

To justify its invasion of Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly invoked both Russian history and the evil nature of the Ukrainian government. Now, some voices in Russia are combining the two. During a broadcast on the state-run Russia-1 channel, notorious propagandist Vladimir Solovyov argued that Russia needs to retaliate against Ukraine and de-Nazify the country with methods developed under Joseph Stalin by figures like Lavrenty Beria. Beria served as head of the secret police under Stalin and was infamous for his brutality, which included rape, torture, and executions. The analogy is not accidental, experts say. "[G]iven that these views are aired so openly on state-controlled TV channels, we must assume that the Kremlin is happy to make them part of the general rhetoric surrounding its invasion of Ukraine," explains Michael Clarke of King's College London. (Newsweek, March 8, 2022)

MORE MEN FOR PUTIN'S WAR MACHINE

Is another Russian conscription drive on the horizon? Ever since his disastrous "partial mobilization" order last Fall prompted hundreds of thousands of Russians to flee the country, Russian President Vladimir Putin has held off on further recruitment efforts for his troubled war in Ukraine – cognizant of the potential social unrest that might ensue. Instead, the Kremlin has relied on other means of augmenting its fight, such as a deepening reliance on the Wagner paramilitary group of mercenaries led by Yevgeny Prigozhin. But now, ongoing troubles on the Ukrainian front – and some very public tensions between Prigozhin and Russia's military brass – are leading the Kremlin to rethink this policy.

Russia expert Paul Goble, citing the URA news agency, reports that "the Kremlin is mobilizing the regions to recruit 400,000 new professional soldiers by the end of 2023." The preparations are said to be coordinated by former president and current Security Council vice-chair Dmitry Medvedev. The new effort will reportedly begin on April 1st, concurrent with the start of the regular Russian draft cycle. "[A]t that time, regional officials including governors are expected to promote this plan with public speeches and appearances; and the Russian military commissariats have been instructed to work with them on this project as well."

The policy, Goble notes, reflects the Kremlin's ongoing priority of fueling its war by conscripting citizens from outside of Moscow, where key decisionmakers and opinion-shapers reside. As a result, "various regions have been assigned quotas for the number of new professional soldiers they have been told to recruit... These numbers strongly suggest that Moscow will try to run this program just as it has the drafting of soldiers for the Ukrainian war in places far beyond the ring road of the capital lest such recruitment efforts exacerbate discontent with the war." (Window on Eurasia, March 10, 2023)

RUSSIA PREPARES FOR CRIMEAN COUNTEROFFENSIVE

Ukraine's government has made clear that it intends to take back the Crimea peninsula, and Russia seems to be taking the possibility seriously. Sergey Aksyonov, the Kremlin-appointed administrator of Crimea, announced that Russia is still planning to erect defense fortifications in the annexed region as a precaution against a possible Ukrainian incursion. According to Aksyonov, authorities are following an "unconventional" approach to construction because of their "experience with armed hostilities." Crimean authorities first announced the construction plans in February, but according to Western intelligence agencies and the Ukrainian military, the construction began in the Fall of 2022. (Meduza, March 10, 2023)

WAGNER'S RECRUITMENT DRIVE

As the Wagner group fights to maintain its dominant position in Russia's war effort, the notorious paramilitary outfit is stepping up its recruitment efforts. On March 10th, Wagner founder Yevgeny Prigozhin announced that Wagner is opening recruitment centers in 42 Russian cities. According to Prigozhin, the recruitment centers will target members of sports centers and martial arts clubs. Wagner has been the leading force behind Russia's offensive in eastern Ukraine, where it primarily used recruits from prisons as cannon fodder for its attacks. However, in early April, the Russian Ministry of Defense reportedly revoked Wagner's permission to recruit convicts. Prigozhin and Russia's military leadership have been embroiled in a bitter feud for months, reflected in Prigozhin's public comment that "despite the spanners that they are throwing in the works at every turn, we will overcome this together." (The Moscow Times, March 10, 2023)

RUSSIA'S COLLAPSING ARMS INDUSTRY

Historically, Russia has ranked second only to the United States in global arms exports. However, the future of Russia's arms export industry is looking increasingly gloomy. During the past five years, Russian arms exports collapsed 31 percent in comparison with the previous five-year period, reflecting a major shift that isn't solely attributable to Russia's failures in Ukraine. Although the poor performance of Russian weapons systems on the Ukrainian battlefield have damaged the country's reputation of late, Russia's declining global market share is also a result of U.S. efforts to isolate Moscow after 2014 and Russia's own inability to keep pace with other leading exporters in high technology. Moreover, it seems unlikely that these dynamics will change in the near future. As Moscow has prioritized its ongoing campaign in Ukraine, arms exports have become relegated to a secondary priority - one which, when combined with the effects of Western sanctions, has helped to significantly undermine Russia's relationship with its client states. (Newsweek, March 12, 2023)