



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2576

April 4, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor, Ian Cameron**

Related Categories: Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Military Innovation; Warfare; Corruption; Russia; Ukraine

RUSSIAN IN NAME ONLY

Last Fall, the Russian government unilaterally claimed sovereignty over four regions in Eastern Ukraine: Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson. More than half a year on, however, the Kremlin hasn't made any effort to integrate these new territories into the Russian Federation, nor has it started to incorporate them into any of Russia's eight federal districts. According to the Kommersant newspaper, the process could begin after regional elections take place in September. That, however, is just notional; the Kremlin has reportedly not yet instructed local authorities in any of those territories to start any such preparations. According to Viktor Vodolatsky, a deputy in the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, that could eventually happen "in the process of stabilization and complete liberation of these territories." (The Moscow Times, March 13, 2023)

HOW WAGNER IS PRESSURING EUROPE

Russia's battlefield failures have forced the Kremlin to bank on the political unity surrounding the international coalition supporting Ukraine fracturing over time. The Wagner mercenary group appears to be trying to help those fractures develop. The Italian government has accused Wagner of causing a surge of African migrants as part of Moscow's retaliation against Western countries. "I think it is now safe to say that the exponential increase in the migratory phenomenon departing from African shores is also, to a not insignificant extent, part of a clear strategy of hybrid warfare that the Wagner division is implementing, using its considerable weight in some African countries," Italian Defense Minister Guido Crosetto has charged. For his part, Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin vehemently denied any involvement in the increased migrant flow in a video uploaded to Telegram. Wagner's mercenaries operate in a variety of African states, including Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic. (Reuters, March 13, 2023)

BATTENING DOWN THE HATCHES

Since the start of the Ukraine war last year, Russian society has grown increasingly authoritarian and repressive, even as ordinary Russians have left the country in record numbers – either to protest the conflict itself or to avoid the possibility of conscription into Vladimir Putin's "special military operation." As the conflict drags on, however, the Kremlin is being forced to contend with another problem: the possible departure of key elites and government officials. Although no official government policy as such exists, Russian officials who are seen as flight risks are now reportedly having their passports seized to prevent them from leaving the country. Since there is no official framework for the seizures, there are exceptions and variations in the policy, with lower-ranking officials being allowed to resign and retain their passports. However, for individuals who work in sensitive government sectors, leaving Russia has reportedly become nearly impossible.

The seizures and confiscations, which are being carried out by Russia's security services, are said to be based on murky interpretations of laws relating to state secrets, espionage and treason. The security services "are coming to certain people and saying, 'please hand in your red civilian passports, because you have access to sensitive information for the motherland, so we want to control your movements,'" Alexandra Prokopenko, a former official at Russia's Central Bank, tells the Financial Times. "Basically any information can be deemed secret, so the embedded FSB officers start telling you that you have sensitive information. What is it? Why is it secret and who decides that? Nobody knows." (Fox News, March 11, 2023; Financial Times, April 3, 2023)

WAGNER TARGETS RUSSIA'S SCHOOLS

As Russia's Wagner paramilitary group struggles to recoup its losses on the battlefield in Ukraine, the organization is now turning to Russia's youth as a potential source of manpower. Wagner has reportedly opened recruiting stations in Russian schools in order to attract "impressionable" recruits and strengthen the group's ideological ambitions." In Apatity, Murmansk Oblast, Wagner soldiers have shared stories of their exploits and promoted the "little Wagner" youth camp in Crimea. According to the Institute for the Study of War, the goal is to conform youth recruits to "Prigozhin's extremist ideological brand of Russian ultranationalism." Wagner has taken a leading role in the fighting in eastern Ukraine in recent months, and the organization is estimated to have lost up to 30,000 soldiers to death and injury as a result. (Business Insider, March 12, 2023)

RUSSIA'S LEGACY WEAPONS BECOME RELEVANT AGAIN

The Russian military has sacrificed massive quantities of weapons systems to its invasion of Ukraine; so much so that Moscow is stopping its disposal of old weapons and weapons systems in response to rampant shortages. Between 2014 and 2022, Russia spent approximately \$100 million disposing of old Soviet-era weapons, but Russia's Defense Ministry hasn't approved any more disposals since January 2022. Russian troops in Ukraine have been plagued by equipment shortages, and according to one Russian army contractor, old Soviet-era equipment is now making its way to the front lines. Due to improper storage, however, this equipment is often in poor condition, which has hampered Russia's ability to effectively fight and make progress on the battlefield. According to Oryx, a website that tracks Russia's equipment losses, Russia lost 8,590 armored vehicles in 2022. (The Moscow Times, March 20, 2023)

DOMESTIC RESISTANCE TO PUTIN RAMPS UP

Over the past year, the Kremlin's crackdowns against Russian society and political opposition have made life within Russia much more unfree. However, the Putin government's domestic repression – and its ongoing war in Ukraine – are generating new forms of dissent, some of it violent. Take, for instance, "Black Bridge," an activist group which recently claimed responsibility for a fire at an FSB building in Rostov-on-Don that reportedly killed at least four people. Moreover, this represents just part of the story. Partisan groups like Black Bridge have been active since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and they have taken responsibility for a range of anti-governmental activities, including attacks on military enlistment offices and the sabotage of transportation infrastructure. Black Bridge itself describes itself as a movement opposed to Vladimir Putin, Russian authorities, and the invasion of Ukraine, and the group advocates aggressive resistance to the Kremlin. Its ultimate goal is said to be "violent resistance and the destruction of the Putin regime as a whole." (Newsweek, March 21, 2023)