



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2577

April 10, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor, Ian Cameron**

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

NOT SO QUIET ON THE EASTERN FRONT

Despite the Kremlin's overwhelming focus on what it sees as threats emanating from NATO expansion and aggression to the country's west, Moscow is taking steps to bolster its military capabilities in the eastern theater, near Japan, as well. During a recent speech to Russia's military leadership, Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu announced that a division of Russia's Bastion missile defense systems had been deployed to the Kuril Islands in the North Pacific. Shoigu characterized the decision as a response to U.S. attempts to "contain" Russia and China. Nor is this the first such step; in the last year, Moscow has moved some 400 military systems to forces in Russia's eastern regions, including SU-57 jets and anti-aircraft missile systems. The announcement comes on the heels of Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow, during which Xi and President Putin cemented the "no limits" partnership between their two countries. (Reuters, March 22, 2023)

RUSSIA'S DEADBEAT DEFENSE MINISTRY

Due to falling oil and gas revenues, Russia has been facing significant budgetary constraints of late – and those limits are beginning to impact Moscow's ability to pay its soldiers. According to a new report by the Verstka web portal analyzing traffic on Russia's VKontakte social media website, residents in no fewer than 52 regions have complained about relatives fighting in Ukraine facing delayed or only partial salary payments. Furthermore, the cutbacks are not limited to one type of soldier; rather, they affect professional soldiers, those who recently enlisted, and those who were conscripted during the "partial mobilization" that took place in September. Valentina Melnikova, head of the Committee of Soldiers' Mothers of Russia, attributes the delays to the near collapse of Russia's military bureaucracy. This has severely constrained how effectively Russia can keep track of the huge numbers of soldiers who have entered the armed forces since February 2022. The official starting salary of Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine is 195,000 rubles (\$2,535) per month, which is almost 14 times higher than the median salary in some Russian regions. (The Moscow Times, March 22, 2023)

RUSSIA HELPS IRAN DEEPEN DOMESTIC REPRESSION

Against the backdrop of the Ukraine war, the strategic bonds between Russia and Iran have deepened considerably, with the latter becoming a major provider of drones and military materiel for the Kremlin's war effort against Kyiv. The partnership between Moscow and Tehran is expanding in other ways as well, however. Russia is now said to be assisting the Islamic Republic to acquire advanced digital surveillance capabilities – a step that the Kremlin has long resisted. Companies like Russia's PROTEI Ltd have reportedly begun providing Iranian telecom firms and mobile providers with internet censorship software. The assistance, experts say, is likely to have a marked impact on Iran's own cyberwarfare capacity. "Given Russia's superior capabilities, any amount of knowledge transfer would improve Iran's cyber capabilities," says Annie Fixler of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. (Wall Street Journal, March 27, 2023)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The technologies being provided by Russia represent a boon for Iran's clerical government, which has weathered the largest sustained challenge to its rule from opposition forces in its 44-year history over the past half-year. They mirror the assistance provided by China to Iran in the aftermath of the 2009 "Green Movement," when tech firms like ZTE helped Tehran to expand its ability to track and monitor its domestic opposition. It was in no small part as a result of that assistance that the Iranian regime was able to successfully quash the "Green Movement" back then.]

A NEW DRAFT BY OTHER MEANS

As the war in Ukraine drags on with Russia continuing to suffer heavy losses, Vladimir Putin is laying the groundwork for further increases in the size of the country's military. Russia's president recently signed a decree increasing the number of individuals Russia will call up for military service during its spring draft. Russia will conscript 147,000 men between the ages of 18 and 27, while during the Spring 2022 conscription campaign, Russia only drafted 136,000. Putin has repeatedly emphasized the need to increase the size of Russia's military since the start of the invasion, and this increase tracks with that priority. Russia also intends to alter its draft age in 2024, shifting both the maximum and minimum ages by three years, and the State Duma is currently considering legislation that will make that change official. (Meduza, March 30, 2023)

PUTIN'S NEW FOREIGN POLICY CONCEPT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought the relationship between Russia and the West to its lowest point in decades, and the Kremlin seems to be treating that situation as a long-term geopolitical reality. President Putin has formally unveiled a new foreign policy strategy focused on curtailing Western dominance and bringing the country closer to India and China. Under the new approach, "the Russian Federation intends to eliminate the worldwide dominance of the United States and other unfriendly countries," the document reads. The sentiments expressed in the strategy echo previous statements by Putin and Sergei Shoigu, Russia's Foreign Minister, both of whom have highlighted the supposed existential threat to Russia presented by the West. The strategy also describes China and India as so-called "friendly sovereign global centers of power and development." Both countries have refused to align themselves with Western sanctions and have radically increased their purchases of Russian oil. (Agence France Presse, March 31, 2023)