



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2578

April 12, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor, Ian Cameron**

Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Warfare; Corruption; Russia; Ukraine

WAGNER FIGHTERS WIN THEIR FREEDOM

The Wagner group's convict soldiers have been a key element of Russia's offensive in Ukraine in recent weeks, and it seems that these cadres will soon receive the reward that they were promised. The British Ministry of Defense (MOD) is reporting that Wagner will soon begin releasing the conscripts, many of whom had been convicted of violent offenses, back into society. According to the MOD, "In the coming weeks, thousands of Russian convicts who have fought for Wagner Group are likely to be pardoned and released." Wagner recruited convicts to fight in Ukraine for six months in exchange for freedom and a presidential pardon, and many of the recruits are now finishing out their six months of combat service. Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner's founder and leader, announced in February that Wagner would stop recruiting in prisons, meaning that the group will likely find it difficult to fill the spots now vacated by those who are being released back into society. (Newsweek, March 21, 2023)

DEEPENING RUSSO-IRANIAN ECONOMIC TIES

Since invading Ukraine, Moscow has been forced to radically reorient its economy away from European markets, and one of the primary beneficiaries has been Iran. In 2022, Russia became Iran's largest source of foreign direct investment, accounting for two-thirds of all FDI flowing into Iran. Russia and Iran have sought to build out their economic ties in other ways as well, and the central banks of the two countries have agreed to connect their interbank communication systems in an attempt to boost bilateral trade. In return for Russia's massive increase in investment and economic cooperation, Tehran is now in a position to provide the Kremlin with practical advice regarding how to adjust to, and successfully circumvent, sanctions levied by the West. (Financial Times, March 23, 2023)

THE CHECHENS MAKE CONTINGENCY PLANS

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow has fought two wars to keep Chechnya within the Russian Federation, but now some Chechens believe that Russia will itself break up because of its war in Ukraine. Islam Belokiev, the spokesman for the volunteer Chechen forces fighting on Ukraine's side against Russia, has revealed that many of Russia's Chechen fighters (colloquially known as "Kadyrovites" for their allegiance to Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov) believe that Russia will soon collapse and are buying real estate outside of Russia in case they need to flee. (Yahoo! News, March 30, 2023)

RUSSIAN ARMS TRADE WITH INDIA IMPACTED

Russia's Ukraine war has proven extremely costly to the Kremlin in many ways, and jeopardizing its status as a global arms merchant is one of them. Take India, for instance. Russia has historically served as one of the primary suppliers of defense equipment to New Delhi. However, the Ukraine war – and Moscow's scramble to sustain it – appears to be endangering that relationship. Indian military officials have told the country's parliament that Russia cannot deliver vital defense supplies due to the war in Ukraine and that a "major delivery" scheduled for this year will not occur. The statement did not clarify exactly what defense supplies Russia is unable to deliver. However, the Indian Air Force (IAF) depends on Russia for components for its Su-30MKI and MiG-29 fighter jets, and the service is currently expecting the delivery of two S-400 air defense systems that India purchased back in 2018. (Reuters, March 23, 2023)

MORE GRIM EVIDENCE OF MILITARY BRUTALITY...

The Russian army's brutal conduct in Ukraine against soldiers and civilians alike has been well-known for some time now. However, new information has brought to light how the Russian military has been brutalizing its own personnel as well. Russian officers in Ukraine are reportedly using female combat medics in the Russian army as "field wives," or, in other words, sex slaves. In an interview with Radio Free Europe, one woman who had served as a combat medic revealed that officers forced female combat medics to perform sexual acts; those who refused were abused until they gave in. A variety of political figures internationally have accused Russia of committing war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the International Criminal Court recently issued a warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin's arrest. (Jerusalem Post, April 2, 2023)

...AND BATTLEFIELD MISSTEPS

Russia's forces have suffered significant losses on the battlefield in Ukraine, but many Russian soldiers are also reportedly dying of non-combat related injuries. According to the UK Defense Ministry, alcohol abuse and inadequate military training have caused a significant portion of Russia's casualties. The Defense Ministry reported that Russian sources highlight alcohol abuse as particularly detrimental to combat effectiveness and as the cause of many crimes and deaths in the Russian army. Accidental firearm deaths have also affected Russian forces, with the UK Defense Ministry linking them to "poor weapon handling drills." Other Western intelligence services have reported on Russia's failure to properly train the troops called up during the partial mobilization in September and on the lack of proper equipment given to mobilized Russian troops. (Jerusalem Post, April 2, 2023)