



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Islamic Extremism; Warfare; Iran; Russia; Africa; Ukraine

WAGNER GAMES SUDAN'S CIVIL CRISIS

Although embroiled in the Ukraine war, Russia's notorious Wagner Group has maintained an active presence abroad – most conspicuously in Africa, where it is playing an important role as hired muscle for regimes in places like the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya and Mali. Sudan has emerged as a "particular focus" for the mercenary outfit, and the group has maintained an active presence in the east African state for years. Now, against the backdrop of Sudan's recent internal factional fighting, Wagner appears to be scrambling to expand its influence there, and taking sides in the fighting in the process.

Wagner's controversial chief, Yevgeny Prigozhin, has reportedly offered to provide the Sudanese Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the militia of Lt. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagelo, with advanced weaponry, including surface-to-air missiles, to aid it in its fight against the Sudanese Army. Prigozhin has claimed that he wants to help achieve a peaceful settlement in Sudan. However, U.S. officials believe that his deepening involvement is instead intended to perpetuate the factional fighting – a state of affairs that would make it easier for his group to further expand its influence in the country, where it already controls significant gold mining concessions. (*Deutsche Welle*, April 17, 2023; *New York Times*, April 23, 2023)

MORE MILITARY HELP FROM TEHRAN

Since the start of the Ukraine war last year, the Islamic Republic of Iran has taken on new strategic importance for Russia as one of the only international partners willing to assist the Kremlin's war of aggression. That assistance has come in the form of advanced materiel, such as drones, as well as artillery and ammunition for Russia's soldiers. Over the last six months, Iran is said to have shipped more than 300,000 artillery shells and one million rounds of ammunition to Russia, primarily using cargo ships and cargo planes. The methods of transportation make it almost impossible for the U.S. to interdict the arms transfers, especially because any maritime action in the Caspian would require assistance from one of the former Soviet republics. The transfers, experts say, reflect a broader shift in the relationship between Moscow and Tehran. According to Anna Borshchevskaya, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, against the backdrop of the Ukraine war the partnership is becoming more strategic in nature – and is likely to pose a threat to American interests and allies beyond Ukraine. (*Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2023)

MOSCOW TARGETS STUDENTS FOR CONSCRIPTION...

As Russia increasingly depletes traditional sources of military recruits for its war effort, the Kremlin has begun to target students in the country's capital, Moscow. The Russian military is trying to meet its goal of enlisting 147,000 young men for compulsory service, and authorities have begun delivering enlistment notices to student dorms and forcibly taking students from campuses to enlistment offices in order to do so. According to an activist with the Conscientious Objectors' Movement, the fact that the authorities began their raids in April instead of May, as is usually the case, suggests they want to quickly recruit 147,000 new conscripts before turning to another mobilization drive. Russia's university students are typically exempt from conscription. However, late last year Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized the country's Defense Ministry to boost combat personnel from 1.15 million to 1.5 million. (*The Moscow Times*, April 25, 2023)

...AMID KREMLIN WORRIES OVER DOMESTIC EFFECTS

A lack of progress in its Ukraine war is forcing Moscow to face tradeoffs between political stability and military necessity. Leaked intelligence assessments lay out how Russia's military is desperate for new troops and has received Putin's backing to "quietly recruit" 400,000 troops throughout 2023. Separately, the Russian military has embarked on a public plan to recruit 415,000 contract troops in 2023 in order to boost its standing army to 1.5 million. However, Russia's bureaucrats are increasingly concerned that these efforts could exacerbate an already acute labor shortage in an economy under heavy pressure from sanctions. Moreover, in order to shield President Putin from any political backlash, plans to recruit additional troops for the Ukraine fight have had to be carried out quietly and clandestinely. (*Washington Post*, April 27, 2023)

RUSSIFYING UKRAINE'S REGIONS

Kyiv has made clear that peace talks are only possible once Russia has vacated the entirety of Ukrainian territory. Moscow, however, is taking steps to make any potential reintegration of occupied regions into Ukraine as difficult as possible. Russia is reportedly resettling poorer Russians from remote regions of that country into Ukraine, and deporting Ukrainians to Russia. Ukraine's deputy defense minister, Hanna Maliar, has said that Moscow is even providing Russian settlers with employment, accommodation, and financial assistance as incentives. According to the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington, DC think tank, this is part of a strategy to complicate potential reintegration and a "deliberate ethnic cleansing effort" that violates the Geneva Convention. British defense officials have further reported that Russia is forcing Ukrainians living in occupied territories to accept Russian passports or face deportation. These steps are taking place as Kyiv prepares for a counteroffensive that could potentially liberate some of the occupied areas in question. (*Newsweek*, April 27, 2023)