



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; Central Asia; Russia; South Africa; Ukraine

DISSENT WITHIN THE NATIONALIST RANKS

The Kremlin launched its initial invasion of Ukraine with the expectation of a quick and easy victory and is now operating without any overarching strategy or goals, a former military commander has charged. Igor Girkin, a notorious Russian nationalist and former commander of forces in Eastern Ukraine, attacked Moscow's wartime leadership in a recent Telegram post, accusing the Kremlin of failing to outline its goals and to develop a comprehensive strategy for succeeding in Ukraine. Girkin also predicted that Russia will lose, since its military "did not succeed in beating the enemy during the winter-spring campaign at all."

Girkin's broadside is part of a broader pattern. Since the start of the invasion, Russian President Vladimir Putin has come under increasing criticism from the country's nationalist camp, whose members are deeply critical of how the government and military have been managing the conflict. (*Newsweek*, May 7, 2023)

BACK TO BISHKEK

Despite myriad setbacks in Ukraine, the Russian military is simultaneously making plans to expand its presence in another corner of the former Soviet Union: Central Asia. Following talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Sadyr Japarov, the President of Kyrgyzstan, the Kremlin has announced that Russia will further "develop" its military presence in the Central Asian state. According to the Kremlin's statement, "the heads of state emphasized the importance of strengthening the Kyrgyz Republic's armed forces and developing Russian military facilities on its territory." Kyrgyzstan already hosts a Russian military base and is part of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The Kremlin's statement also emphasized the need to "deepen military and technical cooperation" and to expand economic and cultural relations between the two countries. (Agence France Presse, May 8, 2023)

MOSCOW SCRAMBLES TO STOP A FLEEING POPULATION

Over the past year, Russia has experienced multiple waves of mass emigration, as citizens fled the country in protest over the Ukraine war or simply to avoid conscription in it. A new decree issued by President Putin has focused on halting, or even reversing, this exodus. Earlier this month, Putin signed an official decree ordering Russian officials to develop new measures for preventing the emigration of Russian citizens. According to a source familiar with the issue, the Russian president has been deeply angered by the mass flight of military eligible individuals, and by the lack of any legal authority to stop them.

Moscow has already taken a number of steps to restrict further emigration, including a law on digitized summons, which created a registry of citizens barred from leaving the country and allowed for them to be called up to the military by digital means (see *Russia Reform Monitor* No. 2579). Estimates on how many Russians have fled the country vary, but Alfa Bank, the country's largest private bank, has placed the number at around 1 million. (*The Moscow Times*, May 12, 2023)

MOSCOW GETS A HELPING HAND FROM PRETORIA

Western governments have become deeply concerned of late regarding the activities of Russia's Wagner mercenary group in Africa, but Moscow is engaging with the continent in other ways as well. Late last year, the U.S. ambassador to South Africa claimed that a Russian ship had picked up an arms shipment at a South African naval base – a charge that Pretoria has denied. However, the company that owns the ship in question was placed under sanctions by the U.S. in May 2022 on the grounds that it transports weapons for the Russian government.

The incident highlights a budding strategic partnership. South Africa has become one of Russia's most significant partners in Africa since the start of the Ukraine war last year, and Pretoria has consistently refused to condemn Russia's invasion. South Africa also participated in naval drills with Russia and China in February 2023. (Reuters, May 12, 2023)