



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2587

June 7, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor, Ian Cameron**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Science and Technology; Warfare; Russia; Ukraine

THE RISKY BUSINESS OF RUSSIAN DEFENSE SCIENCE

As the Kremlin's crackdown on free speech and independent thought intensifies, some of Russia's best and brightest are finding themselves in the crosshairs. In a recent open letter, members of the Institute of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics of the Russian Academy of Sciences' Siberian Branch revealed that at least three of their colleagues involved in hypersonic missile research have been arrested on treason charges in the past year. The scientists' purported crimes? Participating in international conferences, and publishing articles in popular magazines. Authorities have charged that, through these activities, the scientists in question divulged state secrets – even though their work was thoroughly vetted for "restricted information."

The accusations have created a climate of fear in Russian scientific circles. "We see that any article or report could become grounds for the treason charges. What we're rewarded for and made examples of today becomes the cause of criminal prosecution tomorrow," the open letter laid out. "We simply don't understand how to continue our craft." (*The Moscow Times*, May 16, 2023)

TRUSS: FOCUS ON UKRAINIAN VICTORY, NOT RUSSIAN DEMOCRACY

Where is Russia heading, nearly a year-and-a-half into its misadventure in Ukraine? Despite much speculation about the future of Vladimir Putin's regime, Russia's strongman isn't likely to leave the political scene any time soon, former British Prime Minister Liz Truss has said. "I think there's a lot of wishful thinking going on," Truss told reporters on the sidelines of the recent Copenhagen Democracy Summit. "[I]n the longer term, of course, I would like to see Russia headed in the right direction and become a freer, more democratic country." But, she notes, any Russian movement toward democracy is a "long-term project" – and likely one that has been made more complicated by Putin's wartime crackdown on internal dissent. Rather, Truss said, it is more important for the West to focus on the rapid provision of modern weapons to Kyiv, as that constitutes "the only way" to end the conflict. "Because if there was a situation where there were concessions, that would not end the war, that would simply embolden Putin." (*Newsweek*, May 16, 2023)

A DIFFERENT KIND OF PRISONER'S DILEMMA

The war in Ukraine has forced Russia to draw troops from its prison population, which has had a significant impact on the judicial system's treatment of criminal cases. In 2022, Russia granted conditional early release to only 39% of prisoners who had applied for it: one of the lowest approval rates in the last two decades. According to *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, the downward trend is due to a failure by convicts to exhibit good behavior. However, according to Yekaterina Tyutyunnikova, a lawyer at the CentryurService firm, "the absence of criteria for determining the degree of a convict's reform allows the courts and correctional institutions to abuse individuals' right to [conditional early release]."

The trend is intimately connected to Russia's ongoing war effort. Russia has increasingly deployed prisoners to Ukraine, with the Wagner mercenary group beginning to recruit prisoners in August 2022 and Russia's Ministry of Defense taking over the effort in early 2023. In total, Wagner and the Ministry of Defense (MOD) have recruited well over 50,000 prisoners. As Putin gears up for a potential second, more quiet mobilization, the MOD may rely even more heavily on prisoners so as to not alarm the Russian population. (*The Moscow Times*, May 11, 2023)

BELGRADE RETHINKS LOOSENED CITIZENSHIP RULES FOR RUSSIANS

Over the past year, Serbia has become one of the most popular destinations for Russian citizens fleeing Vladimir Putin's regime. But pressure from the European Union has forced Belgrade to walk back a legislative proposal that would have been highly favorable for Russian migrants. Serbia has hit the brakes on a plan to provide Serbian passports to Russians after only a year of residency in response to an EU threat that it could discontinue visa-free travel to the EU for Serbians. The EU has failed to convince Belgrade to ban direct flights from Russia or adopt sanctions against Russia, but according to Jelena Džankić, co-director of the Italy-based Global Citizenship Observatory, "normally when the EU commission gives [a] negative opinion it gets hard for Serbia to push for that law." (*Financial Times*, May 11, 2023)

GREATER CONNECTIVITY FOR KYIV

Since the start of Russia's war in February 2022, the Starlink satellite communications service fielded by entrepreneur Elon Musk's SpaceX corporation has played an essential – if informal – role in securing government and civilian communications in Ukraine. That role is now poised to become bigger, and more official. According to Reuters, Starlink has secured a new Pentagon contract formalizing the company's efforts – and ensuring that they continue uninterrupted. The contract represents an important step forward for connectivity in Ukraine. Up until now, Starlink's services had been funded largely by private donations, and Musk had indicated that the associated costs (an estimated \$20 million per month) could not be absorbed by his firm indefinitely, heightening fears that the service could be cut off. (Reuters, June 1, 2023)