



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; Military Innovation; Warfare; Africa; Russia; Ukraine

THE DEBATE OVER DESIGNATING WAGNER

A bill introduced to Congress earlier this year that would label the Wagner mercenary group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) has been quietly facing objections from the Biden Administration for months. Now, it faces public opposition from members of Congress as well. The Holding Accountable Russian Mercenaries (HARM) Act is a bipartisan measure introduced with the goal of targeting Wagner's capabilities in Ukraine and elsewhere. Wagner is currently designated as a Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO), but an FTO designation would allow for more resources and stricter regulations to combat the group's influence. However, much of the concern of select members of Congress, and of the Biden administration, centers on the fact that the legislation may also affect U.S. diplomatic relations with certain African countries. Critics of the HARM Act state they are worried that the bill may have "unintended consequences," such as blocking U.S. officials from dialogue with African leaders from countries who employ Wagner forces. (*The Hill*, June 6, 2023)

[EDITORS' NOTE: It is as yet unclear what, if any, effect Wagner chief Yevheny Prigozhin's short-lived mutiny against the Russian government in late June will have on the debate above.]

MINSK AND MOSCOW'S NUKES

In mid-June, for the first time since the collapse of the USSR, the Kremlin deployed tactical nuclear weapons beyond Russia's borders. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko confirmed that his country had begun to take delivery of Russian tactical nuclear weapons "three times more powerful than the atomic bombs the U.S. dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945." Russian President Vladimir Putin has said his government would retain control of the arms. Lukashenko, however, has emphasized that their forward positioning in Belarus would allow for their swift deployment should the need arise. (Reuters, June 14, 2023)

THE FATE OF RUSSIA'S MILITARY BRASS

Last month saw the death of another high-ranking Russian general, prompting the question of exactly how many of the country's top military officers have perished since the start of Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" against Kyiv. The death of Maj.-Gen. Sergei Goryachev in the Zaporizhzhia region as a result of a Ukrainian missile strike marked what Moscow says is the fourth death of a top military commander since the war began. Other estimates, however, place the number significantly higher, at seven generals killed to date, together with an estimated 58 colonels and 176 lieutenant colonels. In other words, Russia has now lost more generals in a year-and-a-half of war in Ukraine than it did during the entirety of the 1979-1989 Afghan war, when five Soviet generals were killed. (*The Messenger*, June 14, 2023)

RUSSIA REVISITS THE FOOD WEAPON

Since the start of Russia's war in Ukraine last year, a persistent worry for the developing world has been the potential interruptions of food deliveries from Ukraine – which serves as a major supplier of grainstuffs for many countries. Those worries were mitigated, at least somewhat, by the formation of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, spearheaded by Turkey. That deal, which was inked in July of 2022, permitted the resumption of Ukrainian grain exports from the Black Sea via the Bosphorus Strait. From the start, however, Moscow's adherence to the arrangement has been tentative, with the Kremlin committing only to short extensions and repeatedly threatening to abandon it altogether.

The specter of such a move by Moscow is now rising anew. In early June, Russia's Foreign Ministry signaled that it saw no reason to extend the Black Sea grain deal, which is set to expire in mid-July. The Russian declaration led to feverish consultations with UN officials, as well as some major concessions to the Kremlin – including a United Nations commitment to facilitate Russian food and fertilizer shipments for the next three years. Russia's intransigence has persisted, however. According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, there is still no reason for his government to extend the arrangement – but Moscow remains committed to supplying its own client states with steady supplies of foodstuffs after the deal's expiration on July 17th.

Predictably, Russia's intransigence has prompted still more concessions from the West. The European Union is now said to be weighing a proposal for the Russian Agricultural Bank, which is currently under sanctions as a result of the Ukraine war, to establish a subsidiary and reconnect to the SWIFT global financial network in order to handle payments for grain deliveries. (*Daily Sabah*, June 5, 2023; Reuters, June 30, 2023; Reuters, July 3, 2023)