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Related Categories: Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Warfare; Russia; Ukraine

[EDITORS' NOTE: After nearly 2,600 issues, the *Russia Reform Monitor* is undergoing a name change. Beginning with the current edition, it will be rebranded as the *Russia Policy Monitor*, which we believe more accurately reflects the scope of our coverage, as well as the potential for change within Russia itself – at least for the foreseeable future. Thanks, as always, for your continued readership.]

WAR SERVICE BECOMES A (MOSTLY) BLANK CHECK FOR MISBEHAVIOR

The Kremlin is continuing to search for ways to beef up its military ranks in order to reinforce its flagging war effort in Ukraine. To this end, the State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, recently passed a law exempting soldiers who served in the Russia-Ukraine war from persecution for certain crimes. The draft legislation exempts active duty soldiers, both professionals and conscripts, from liability for crimes that are classified as "low" or "medium" severity. The measure, which still needs to be approved by the Federation Council and signed by President Vladimir Putin, doesn't cover severe infractions such as murder, rape or espionage. It would, however, provide soldiers with immunity from persecution from other criminal acts and legal infractions. (*Meduza*, June 20, 2023)

NEW UNDERSTANDINGS BETWEEN MOSCOW AND HAVANA

Desperate times call for desperate measures – and the revival of historic partnerships. Thus, Moscow and Havana, which had close strategic ties during the Cold War, are buttressing their alliance anew. The two countries have signed a series of new agreements dealing with tourism, the sale of wheat and oil, and the resumption of commercial flights. The arrangements were arrived at as a result of the recent visit to Russia of Cuban Prime Minister Manuel Marrero and other high-ranking Cuban officials. (*Foreign Desk News*, June 21, 2023)

A STUMBLING BLOCK FOR WESTERN EFFORTS TO SEIZE RUSSIAN ASSETS

The international effort to punish Russia for its aggression against Ukraine has hit a hurdle. Recent discussions in both the U.S. and Europe have centered on the possibility of seizing some \$300 billion in Russian reserves currently frozen in various Western jurisdictions and rendering them to Kyiv as restitution for Moscow's military offensive. The EU, however, has so far failed to find a legal means to do so. A recent working group convened by the bloc has deemed that there is "no credible legal avenue allowing for the confiscation of frozen or immobilized assets on the sole basis of these assets being under E.U. restrictive measures."

European authorities, however, are exploring other potential avenues to seize the Russian funds. One is to invest the frozen Russian assets, and then to send the resulting revenues to Ukraine. However, according to experts, such a course of action carries significant legal risk. Another option is "windfall contribution," which "would require firms with large Russian holdings that are generating profits to transfer a share of those profits to the E.U." (*Meduza*, June 21, 2023)

WHAT WAS PRIGOZHIN THINKING?

More details are leaking out about Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin's short-lived armed rebellion against the Kremlin, and evidence is pointing to the fact that the mutiny was not simply for show – but that it was, rather, a forced improvisation. According to Western intelligence sources, the mercenary chief had originally planned on capturing Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov, with whom he had publicly feuded in recent months over sub-par military materiel for his forces fighting in Ukraine. But, intelligence reports have revealed, Prigozhin's plans were found out, causing him to improvise a march on Moscow that culminated in a forced compromise with the Kremlin and the oligarch's exile to Belarus. (*Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2023)

MINSK'S ROLE IN RUSSIAN WAR CRIMES

Since the start of the Ukraine war, much international attention has been paid to Russia's violations of the laws and acceptable principles of war – including its practice of forcibly transporting Ukrainian minors into Russia from territories under its occupation. Now, a leading opposition figure has charged that Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko has been complicit in those crimes. In a case brought before the International Criminal Court, Pavel Latushka, a Belarusian opposition activist, has charged that more than 2,100 Ukrainian children from 15 or more Russian-occupied cities have been forcibly taken to Belarus with the approval of Lukashenko's government – and that he has the documents to prove it. Latushka's hope is that the materials in question would prompt the ICC to issue a warrant for the arrest of Belarus' president, as it had done previously for Russian President Vladimir Putin. (*Foreign Desk News* , June 30, 2023)