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MOSCOW'S LOSS, RIYADH'S GAIN

Since the start of its war in Ukraine, Russia has found itself progressively shut out of global energy markets as a result of Western sanctions that have progressively cut Moscow off from the global energy market. The Kremlin, in turn, has found itself forced to sell its energy at cut-rate prices to countries such as China and India, who have not followed the West's lead and slashed their energy imports from Russia. Saudi Arabia, it appears, is one of those nations, despite its longstanding relationship with the United States. Riyadh has reportedly taken advantage of Russia's discounted energy trade, and increased its imports of oil from Russia by nearly 1000% in the past year.

The shift is a reflection of Saudi Arabia's changing energy strategy. Both countries are leading members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which announced a production cut and a reduction in crude oil exports at the beginning of July. Because of the Western sanctions against Moscow, however, Saudi Arabia has assumed a much larger share of crude oil exports to Europe, thereby encouraging it to import petroleum from Russia in order to free up its domestic production for foreign sales. (*AI-Monitor*, July 13, 2023)

WAGNER'S CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES...

In the wake of the late June mutiny by Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin, the fate of the mercenary outfit remains uncertain. Questions are now swirling over Wagner's footprint in places like Africa and Syria amid reports that its forces have lost autonomy and have been brought to heel by the Russian military. What is apparent, however, is that Wagner is no longer playing a leading role in the Kremlin's war against Ukraine. The group has reportedly turned over 2,000 pieces of military equipment to Moscow, and a detachment of its soldiers has arrived in Belarus, where asylum was secured for them by Prigozhin. There, Wagner cadres have reportedly begun training the Belarusian military. (*Al Jazeera*, July 14, 2023; *Yahoo News*, July 16, 2023)

...MIGHT MEAN AN EXPANDED THREAT FROM THE NORTH

Wagner's new role and position, in turn, could presage a widening of the current war in Ukraine. Wagner detachments have reportedly begun carrying out training maneuvers with the Belarusian army close to that country's common border with Poland, leading Warsaw to mass troops along the boundary in response. That activity, Belarusian strongman Alexander Lukashenko has said, reflects a desire by the mercenary group to "go west." "The Wagner guys have started to stress us. They want to go west," Lukashenko is said to have told Russian President Vladimir Putin during a recent meeting in Moscow. "Let's go on a trip to Warsaw and Rzeszow," Lukashenko relayed the mercenaries as saying. (*CNN*, July 20, 2023; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 23, 2023)

[EDITORS' NOTE: In spite of Lukashenko's comments, the mercenary group poses only a minimal danger to Belarus' neighbors. As military officials have noted, Wagner has little manpower and capability to carry out meaningful cross-border operations – at least at present. The larger fear, however, is that the supplemental forces might prompt Lukashenko's Kremlin-aligned regime to act more aggressively, either independently or in support of Russia's war in Ukraine.]

RUSSIA'S WAR ON UKRAINIAN CHILDREN

Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine's culture and people is perhaps most evident in how Moscow has treated the country's children since the start of its offensive last year. Ukrainian children have become major targets for illegal deportation by Russian forces, under what Moscow claims is a policy of protecting orphans and minors. The scope of the policy is staggering; 260,000 Ukrainian children are estimated to have been deported in just the first five months of the war, but the figure now is much, much larger. According to Russian media reports, around 700,000 children have found "refuge" in Russia. There, these children are subjected to a policy of "Russification" designed to diminish and ultimately remove understanding of, and loyalty to, Ukrainian culture. The Kremlin's conduct, observers say, rises to the level of a grave war crime, given that forced population transfer is included in the 1948 Genocide Convention's definition of genocide. (Reuters, July 3, 2023)

WHERE ARE MOSCOW'S CHECHEN REINFORCEMENTS?

The Russian government may have fallen out with Wagner, but the mercenary group is turning out to be harder to replace than the Kremlin thought. The void created by Wagner's post-mutiny departure from the country was supposed to be filled by Chechen forces loyal to Moscow, most prominently the Akhmat special military unit directed by Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. But the main role being played by these fighters appears to be to prevent regular Russian troops from fleeing their posts. "From our observations, the 'Akhmat' unit performs the function of a blocking detachment, deterring Russian regular troops from escaping from their occupied positions," one Ukrainian officer has noted. "The 'Akhmat' unit avoids participating in combat clashes." (*U.S. News & World Report*, July 20, 2023)