



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Warfare; Africa; North Africa; Russia; Ukraine

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

Even before the attempted putsch by Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin in late June, the Kremlin was in need of manpower for its war in Ukraine. In the aftermath of the abortive mutiny, however, the situation has become even more dire – as Wagner mercenaries have been sent packing and the group, previously the tip of the Russian military spear, has left the battlefield. All this helps to explain Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent decision to sign into law a bill raising the age of military reserves that could be called up for service to 65. As a practical matter, this means that pensioners in Russia (where the retirement age is 65) can be called up to serve in the country's armed forces. The move mirrors a recent change to the military draft age for Russian men, which has been expanded to range from 18 to 30. (*Agentsvo*, July 24, 2023)

WAGNER TO REMAIN A FORCE IN AFRICA

After much speculation about the future of Wagner's global operations, it seems that the Kremlin is allowing the mercenary group to continue its activities in Africa – for now. Though some countries on the continent, like the Central African Republic (CAR), have expressed a desire for a regular troop presence from the Russian military instead, the Russian Ministry of Defense seems to recognize that it is not currently possible for its armed forces to replace the role Wagner is playing. Thus, the Russian government appears resigned to allowing Wagner to remain in place in the CAR and other African nations, where it has played an important role in propping up local governments – and extending Russia's influence on the continent – in recent years. (*Bloomberg*, July 10, 2023)

QUIETLY, WASHINGTON TESTS THE DIPLOMATIC WATERS WITH MOSCOW

Despite public denials from the White House, a former U.S. official has claimed that backchannel talks are indeed taking place between Washington and Moscow. The Biden administration has officially stuck to the line that it will have no discussions with Russia without Ukraine as part of the conversation. But the former White House official is telling a different story. The source named Russian President Vladimir Putin as the main roadblock to diplomatic progress, but also gleaned from the conversations that the "Russians were unable to articulate what exactly they wanted and needed," regarding either a victory or a loss. The former official further stated that suffering a humiliating defeat is "not an option" for Russia, and that the U.S. should work to prevent such an outcome while seeking to influence the anti-war Russian elite. (*The Moscow Times*, July 27, 2023)

HOW RUSSIA IS TARGETING UKRAINE'S CHILDREN

Despite Kremlin denials to the contrary, the evidence is mounting that – as part of its ongoing war on Ukraine – Russia is also seeking to reshape the hearts and minds of the country's future generations. The latest proof comes in a new report issued by Russia's Children's Rights Commissioner, Maria Lvova-Belova. The study lays out that, since the start of the war in February 2022, Russia has "taken in" nearly 5 million Ukrainian citizens – including more than 700,000 children. That figure includes hundreds of children from the breakaway Ukrainian republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, which Russia occupies, who have been "placed under the care of Russian families."

Lvova-Belova's report attempts to whitewash these practices, which have earned her (as well as Russian president Vladimir Putin) an arrest warrant from the International Criminal Court. Ukrainian minors "were sent, with chaperones and under agreements with their parents, to health resorts and recreational and rehabilitative organizations in Crimea and the Krasnodar region," her report maintains. Ukrainian watchdogs, however, argue otherwise. Children of War, a Ukrainian humanitarian project, has documented nearly 20,000 cases of Ukrainian minors being forcibly deported from Ukraine by Russian occupying forces. (*Meduza*, July 31, 2023)

AN OLD CLIENT STATE COMES CALLING

Even as it continues to wage war on Ukraine, Russia is prepared to help a key Kremlin regional ally to arm – and potentially prepare for renewed conflict in North Africa. Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu recently held talks with Said Chengriha, the Chief of Staff of Algeria's Armed Forces, about expanded cooperation between the two longtime allies. Algeria has been seeking to modernize its military, with an eye toward regional rival Morocco. The project, apparently, is one that Moscow supports. "Russia is interested in Algeria's leading position in security in northern Africa, and the Ministry of Defense of the Russian Federation is ready to contribute to improving the combat capabilities of the Algerian Armed Forces," Shoigu is reported to have told Chengriha. (*Channel 9 Israel*, August 1, 2023)