



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Policy Monitor No. 2597

August 14, 2023 **Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor, Josie Massenet**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; Middle East; Russia; Ukraine

A NEW GULAG ARCHIPELAGO

In an echo of the Soviet Union's infamous policies involving the widespread detention of dissidents and other political undesirables, the Kremlin has begun erecting a network of prisons to handle the civilian dimension of its current war against Ukraine. These facilities, located in Russia itself and in parts of Ukraine that it controls, are designed to house the thousands of Ukrainians, both soldiers and civilians, that Russian forces have taken captive to date – and the thousands more that they intend to in the months ahead. The scope of this effort is massive. An Associated Press expose published last month, and drawing from official Russian government documents, details official plans "to create 25 new prison colonies and six other detention centers" in Ukraine alone by 2026. (Associated Press, July 13, 2023)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The timeline of this new prison system is extremely telling. It suggests that, despite the extensive Western sanctions levied by the United States and Europe, the Russian government nonetheless believes it still has the capacity – and the time – to engage in a protracted war of attrition against Ukraine.]

RIYADH ATTEMPTS TO PLAY PEACEMAKER

In early August, Saudi Arabia was the site of the latest international effort to de-escalate the Ukraine war. Senior officials from some forty countries traveled to the Kingdom in an effort to hammer out key principles for ending the conflict. One country, however, was conspicuous by its absence. Russia, the instigator of the conflict and the central participant in any resolution, was not invited to the gathering. That, Kremlin officials said, made the meeting pointless, and without "the slightest added value."

Yet, while a durable solution to the war wasn't reached by the parties, the meeting did showcase some notable movement on a number of fronts. One was a shift in Saudi Arabia's stance; the Kingdom, which has long sought neutrality in its approach to the conflict, now appears to be pivoting toward a more active, and pro-Ukrainian, position. Another was China. While Moscow and Beijing have repeatedly affirmed their "no limits partnership," the presence of China's official envoy for Eurasia, Li Hui, at the Jeddah meeting suggested to U.S. officials that the PRC might be moving toward a more "productive" role. (*The Independent*, August 7, 2023; *The Hill*, August 7, 2023)

FLAGGING AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE AID

Since the start of Russia's war of aggression last year, one of Ukraine's biggest fears has been that Western support for its fight for independence could dwindle over time. That appears to be precisely what is happening in the United States. A new poll of over 1,000 respondents carried out for CNN has found that a majority of Americans now oppose the provision of additional funding for Ukraine's war effort. Fifty-five percent of those surveyed said that Congress should not authorize additional funding for the support of Ukraine, with 51% indicating that the U.S. had already done "enough" in support of Kyiv. Those opinions, moreover, appear to be divided along partisan lines, with some 71% of Republicans polled opposing additional aid and 62% of Democrats favoring greater funding. (*CNN*, August 4, 2023)

ANOTHER SENTENCE FOR NAVALNY

Russia's most prominent opposition figure has just received an onerous new sentence from a court outside Moscow. Alexei Navalny, currently serving an 11 1/2 year sentence on charges of fraud and other infractions, was given an additional 19 years behind bars for alleged incitement of extremism. Navalny's sentence is to be served in a "special-regime colony," one with more stringent and onerous conditions than the correctional facility in the Vladimir region where Navalny is currently being held.

The sentence has brought condemnations from both the European Union and the United States, who have decried the "instrumentalization" of the justice system by the Kremlin to silence its critics and intimidate its opponents. Navalny, for his part, indicated the added sentence was entirely predictable. "The number doesn't matter," Navalny said in a statement posted on social media. "I understand very well that, like many political prisoners, I am serving a life sentence — where life is measured by the duration of my life or the life of this regime." (*Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2023)