



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Economic Sanctions; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Science and Technology; North Korea; Russia; Ukraine

RUSSIA AND NORTH KOREA: OFFICIAL COMITY...

As its full-scale invasion of Ukraine has dragged on, Moscow has looked further and further afield for material and manpower to fuel its war effort. Support from Iran, for instance, has been essential to bolstering Russia's aerial capabilities with "kamikaze" drones that have been used to target Ukrainian civilian centers. Now, the Kremlin is looking for assistance from another rogue: North Korea. Rumors are swirling of an impending summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. Russia is believed to be seeking to buy ammunition from North Korea in order to replenish reserves depleted by the Ukraine conflict. For its part, experts say, North Korea will be seeking both food and energy from Russia as compensation. Should the meeting materialize, it would represent the first time that Kim has met with a foreign leader since before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. (*Associated Press*, September 5, 2023)

...AND UNOFFICIAL FRICTION

But while Moscow and Pyongyang may be officially aligned, all is not necessarily well at a deeper level. In a new report, computer giant Microsoft has laid out that hackers from North Korea targeted Russian diplomats and at least one aerospace technology facility earlier this year as part of a significant cyber-hacking operation. "North Korean threat actors may be capitalizing on the opportunity to conduct intelligence collection on Russian entities due to the country's focus on its war in Ukraine," Microsoft said in its report. It is unclear whether the hacking was opportunistic in nature or reflected opposition to the Ukraine war on the part of the North Korean actors. (*Reuters*, September 8, 2023)

ELECTION SEASON IN UKRAINE'S OCCUPIED EAST

Last September, the Kremlin unilaterally declared sovereignty over four Ukrainian regions - Kherson, Zaporizhzhya, Donetsk, and Luhansk - as part of its full scale invasion of the country. Nearly a year on, Moscow is moving to solidify those claims, despite the fact that it does not fully occupy any of the four regions. In early September, regional officials (appointed by Russia) in the four oblasts launched elections there, in parallel with regional elections taking place in Russia's regions. The votes have been widely decried by the international community, with Ukraine's government calling them "pseudo-elections" and rejecting their legitimacy. The results "will have no legal consequences and will not lead to a change in the status of the Ukrainian territories captured by the Russian army," Ukraine's foreign ministry has said. "By organizing fake elections in the Ukrainian regions and Crimea, the Kremlin continues to delegitimize the Russian legal system."

Washington has taken the same view. "The Kremlin hopes these pre-determined, fabricated results will strengthen Russia's illegitimate claims to the parts of Ukraine it occupies, but this is nothing more than a propaganda exercise," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in an official statement. "Russia's actions demonstrate its blatant disregard for UN Charter principles like respect for state sovereignty and territorial integrity, which underpin global security and stability. The United States will never recognize the Russian Federation's claims to any of Ukraine's sovereign territory, and we remind any individuals who may support Russia's sham elections in Ukraine, including by acting as so-called 'international observers,' that they may be subject to sanctions and visa restrictions." (*U.S. Department of State*, September 7, 2023; *The Guardian*, September 8, 2023)

VICTOR BOUT'S SECOND ACT

Last Fall, in the midst of the Ukraine war, the Biden administration carried out a prisoner exchange with Moscow, swapping notorious arms merchant Victor Bout for jailed WNBA player Brittney Griner. Now, Bout is back in Russia - and embarking upon a new career in Russian politics. The man known as the "merchant of death" is one of the candidates in this month's regional elections in Russia, campaigning for a regional assembly seat in Ulyanovsk, a territory some 500 miles east of Moscow. Bout was arrested in Thailand in 2008 and subsequently extradited to the United States, where he served nearly fifteen years of a twenty-five year prison sentence. (*DNYUZ*, September 10, 2023)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Bout's candidacy is an interesting one to watch, and not only because of his deeply-checkered past. The former arms dealer appears to have the support of some influential Kremlin officials; this summer, for instance, he was invited to attend the high-profile Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg. Bout can be expected to win his desired seat if it comports with the interests of the Kremlin.]