



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Warfare; Resource Security; Border Security; Caucasus; Middle East; Russia; Ukraine

SPECULATION SURROUNDS CHECHNYA'S STRONGMAN

Chechnya's notorious strongman, Ramzan Kadyrov, has dominated both Russian and international headlines since he took power in the restive Russian republic in 2007. In the years since, Kadyrov has distinguished himself as a brutal ruler, as well as a useful and loyal servant of Russian president Vladimir Putin – most recently, through his contribution of fighters (the so-called Kadyrovtsi) to Moscow's "special military operation" against Ukraine. For quite some time now, however, rumors have swirled of the 46-year-old regional leader's ill-health, and such speculation has surfaced anew.

In mid-September, in a report carried by a variety of Western news outlets, Ukraine's military intelligence branch divulged that the diseases plaguing the warlord had "worsened" and that Kadyrov was now in "serious condition." (He is believed to be suffering from significant kidney problems, among other maladies.) The rumors prompted Kadyrov himself to release a pair of videos on social messaging app Telegram in an attempt to dispel the persistent rumors regarding his status. It was not immediately apparent, however, when the videos were actually recorded. (*The Daily Beast*, September 15, 2023; *Al-Arabiya*, September 17, 2023)

A DEEPENING GOLD TRADE WITH ABU DHABI

As Western sanctions continue to whittle away at the health of Russia's economy, Moscow is turning to alternative means of generating revenue – and finding new partners for doing so. Over the past year, *Al-Monitor* reports, Russia surpassed other suppliers (like Mali, Zimbabwe and Ghana) to become the top source of gold for the United Arab Emirates. In 2022, the Gulf state imported 96.4 tons of gold from Russia – accounting for one-third of Russia's annual production, and fifteen times what it had imported the year prior. (*Al Monitor*, September 20, 2023)

THE HIGH COST OF AVOIDING MILITARY SERVICE

Failing to appear for military service can carry steep penalties in Russia, even under the most extenuating of circumstances. A military court in Vladikavkaz has convicted the first woman for failing to take part in the war against Ukraine – despite the fact that she was recommended for temporary exemption by medical authorities due to the fact that she was pregnant. In making their case against Corporal Madina Kabaloyeva, military prosecutors pointed to the fact that she had continued to receive allowances and benefits from the Russian armed forces, meaning she was required to report for service. (*Meduza*, September 18, 2023)

MORE SIGNS OF LONG-TERM MILITARY PLANNING

In yet another sign that Russia is settling in for a protracted war of attrition against Ukraine, the country's top defense official has signaled that the Kremlin's "special military operation" has become an integral part of the country's future defense planning. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reportedly told a recent Ministry board meeting that "we continue to increase the combat power of the Armed Forces, including through the supply of modern weapons and the improvement of the training of troops, taking into account the experience of a special military operation." "Consistent implementation of the activities of the action plan until 2025 will allow to achieve the intended goals," Shoigu said in comments carried by the RIA-Novosti news agency.

Those military upgrades that Shoigu spoke of are being made possible by a massive planned hike in Russian defense spending. According to the country's draft budget, defense spending will make up 6% of total Russian GDP in 2024 – rising from its current level of 3.9%. Moreover, Bloomberg notes, the likely sum will be higher still, because "secret expenditure on classified or unspecified items is forecast to nearly double." (*Bloomberg*, September 22, 2023; *RIA-Novosti*, September 26, 2023)

A FIRE SALE IN CRIMEA

The Kremlin's proxies are busy redistributing the wealth in Crimea – and thumbing their nose at Kyiv in the process. Authorities installed by the Russian government on the Peninsula, which was unilaterally annexed by Moscow back in 2014, have held eight auctions to date to sell off "previously nationalized properties belonging to Ukrainian businessmen," *Meduza* reports. The Russian administration in Crimea ultimately plans to sell off some 100 such nationalized assets, among them an apartment belonging to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. (*Meduza*, September 16, 2023)

