



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Policy Monitor No. 2626

April 19, 2024 **Ilan I. Berman, Chloe E. Smith, Walker Robinson**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; NATO; China; Russia; Ukraine

FEAR AND LOATHING IN MOSCOW

Russian officials are once again fretting over the Atlantic Alliance. The Kremlin has declared that Russia and NATO are now in "direct confrontation" as a result of the bloc's ongoing support for Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin has argued that the West cumulatively misled Russia after the Cold War by expanding the Alliance eastward, and his government's war with Ukraine is ostensibly designed in part to prevent further NATO expansion. If so, however, it has proved distinctly counterproductive, because Russia's aggression against Ukraine – and concomitant worries that Moscow may target other former Soviet holdings in the future – has led to a revitalization of NATO, as well as its expansion (through the recent addition of Sweden and Finland as member states). All this, in turn, is being perceived by Moscow as even more of a threat. In recent comments to reporters, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov said that relations between Russia and NATO "have now slipped to the level of direct confrontation," and argued that the bloc "continues to move towards our borders and expand its military infrastructure towards our borders." (Reuters, April 4, 2024)

THE KREMLIN ENFORCES CONFORMITY

Amid its ongoing war against Ukraine, the Russian government is intensifying its clampdown on dissent. The latest victims are women's rights activist Darya Serenko and journalist Mikhail Zygar, both of whom were recently added to the Interior Ministry's wanted list on the basis of charges that still remain unknown. Serenko, co-founder of the Feminist Anti-War Resistance group, and Zygar, a founding editor of independent TV channel *Dozhd*, both left Russia following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and have been labeled "foreign agents" *in absentia*.

The pair, however, are only the most recent individuals to be blacklisted by the Kremlin. Over the past two years, hundreds of activists and journalists have faced legal action for protesting against the Ukraine war, with many receiving fines or jail sentences as a result. Existing Russian law, which has been amended over the past two years, now prohibits the spread of "false" information about the Russian armed forces, a crime that is punishable by up to 15 years in prison. The charge, moreover, is used extensively to silence dissenters, even those abroad. Another women's rights activist, Zalina Marshenkulova, was recently charged on other grounds, that of "justifying terrorism," and is now facing up to seven years in prison as a result of her social media posts. (Associated Press, April 10, 2024)

A STRANGE NUCLEAR EMERGENCY IN Khabarovsk

The Russian city of Khabarovsk has declared a state of emergency as a result of unspecified nuclear contamination. Local authorities have yet to report the cause of the crisis in the Far Eastern city, which is home to a population of some 630,000 people. The source of the radiation, however, was reportedly removed from the city and "transported to a radioactive waste storage facility." Reports, meanwhile, indicate that authorities knew about the leak for about a week before they responded or informed the public. Nonetheless, officials claim that there is no immediate threat to life or the environment. (*Daily Mirror*, April 5, 2024)

THE HIGH COST OF PUTIN'S ADVENTURISM

The tide of the Ukraine war may have now turned in favor of Russia, thanks to delays in the West's provision of vital military aid to Ukraine. Nevertheless, the human cost Russia has paid for its military offensive against its western neighbor is steep – and getting steeper. Just how much was laid out in a recent tally carried out by the BBC's Russian Service in conjunction with opposition news outlet *Mediazona*. The joint survey, which relied on open-source information, put the official number of Russian soldiers to have been killed last year at over 27,300. However, the researchers caution, the real figure is likely much higher, both because the Kremlin has covered up and mislabeled some of the casualties and because their research did not cover militias operating in the Russian-occupied Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. All told, the survey concluded, 50,000 Russian servicemen have been killed in Ukraine since the start of Russian President Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" there. (*The Moscow Times*, April 17, 2024)

THE (SURPRISING) VIEW FROM BEIJING

No matter the current disposition of the Ukraine war, Russia is destined for defeat there, a leading Chinese scholar has posited. Writing in *The Economist*, professor Feng Yujun of Peking University lays out the four reasons why Russia "is sure to lose" its war of choice. The first is "the level of resistance and national unity shown by Ukrainians, which has until now been extraordinary. The second is international support for Ukraine, which, though recently falling short of the country's expectations, remains broad." The third reason has to do with the "nature of modern warfare," which relies on "industrial might and command, control, communications and intelligence systems" – areas where the Kremlin has lagged behind other nations, owing to its post-Soviet history.

Finally, Feng says, information is decisive. "When it comes to decision-making, Vladimir Putin is trapped in an information cocoon, thanks to his having been in power so long. The Russian president and his national-security team lack access to accurate intelligence. The system they operate lacks an efficient mechanism for correcting errors."

The end result, he therefore posits, is that Russia's eventual defeat is an inevitability, and "[i]n time it will be forced to withdraw from all occupied Ukrainian territories, including Crimea." The effects of this misadventure, meanwhile, are liable to prove long-lasting. "The war is a turning-point for Russia," Feng writes. "It has consigned Mr Putin's regime to broad international isolation." Moreover, "political risk in Russia is very high. Mr Putin may recently have been re-elected, but he faces all kinds of possible black-swan events." (*The Economist*, April 11, 2024)