



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Policy Monitor No. 2619

February 22, 2024 **Ilan I. Berman, Chloe E. Smith, Walker Robinson**

Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Democracy and Governance; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Russia

THE KREMLIN SIDELINES ONE POLITICAL CHALLENGER...

Although Russia's presidential election won't take place until next month, its outcome – a resounding repeat victory for strongman president Vladimir Putin – has already been preordained in detail by the Kremlin. That, however, hasn't stopped a few stalwart souls from stepping forward to challenge the incumbent. One such opposition candidate is Boris Nadezhdin. Nadezhdin, who served in Russia's lower house of parliament, the State Duma, from 1999 to 2003, received an endorsement for his candidacy from Andrey Nechayev's "Civic Initiative" party, and subsequently staked out a position as a "principled opponent of Putin's policies." That includes advocating against the Kremlin's war on Ukraine, for more pacific relations with the West, and in favor of a more *laissez faire* attitude toward LGBTQ+ rights within the country.

Nadezhdin's political hopes proved to be short lived, however. On February 5th, the country's Central Election Commission formally decided to bar him from running for president on the basis of supposed invalid signatures, claiming Nadezhdin had amassed less than the required 100,000 signatures to stand as a candidate. Since then, Russia's Supreme Court had rejected multiple appeals by Nadezhdin and his team, upholding the decision to bar him from next month's vote. (*Meduza*, January 30, 2024; *CNN*, February 8, 2024; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 21, 2024)

...AND ELIMINATES ANOTHER

On February 16th, Russia's most famous political prisoner, Alexei Navalny, died unexpectedly while incarcerated at the "Polar Wolf" penal colony, located in Russia's remote Yamalo-Nenets region, above the Arctic circle. According to Russia's Federal Penitentiary Service, the 47-year-old anti-corruption campaigner died from "sudden death syndrome" while walking the colony's grounds. However, Russian authorities have refused to release Navalny's body to his family, or to provide additional details regarding medical treatment provided to Navalny, who had appeared in court a day earlier via video link and seemed to be in good health. Navalny's family has insisted that he was poisoned by a nerve agent on the orders of Russian President Vladimir Putin. (*New York Post*, February 19, 2024)

AFTER NAVALNY, A NEW LEADER OF THE RUSSIAN OPPOSITION?

The death of Alexei Navalny, most likely orchestrated by the Kremlin, appears to have been intended to take a key player – and potential gadfly – off the political board ahead of Russia's elections next month. If so, the Russian government's plans may be complicated by Navalny's widow, Yulia. In a social media post issued days after her husband's death, Navalnaya pinned the blame squarely on Russia's president. "In killing Aleksei, Putin killed half of me, half of my heart and half of my soul," she said. "But I have another half left — and it is telling me I have no right to give up."

Her statement has fueled speculation that Navalnaya might continue her husband's crusade against the Kremlin. While traditionally avoiding the political limelight, Yulia Navalnaya had been a key part of her husband's activism for years, assisting in the investigations of his Anti-Corruption Foundation and supporting his successive bids for political office in opposition to Russian authorities. As such, she has significant institutional knowledge and experience which could reinvigorate the Russian opposition. Whether she can mobilize popular sentiment in Russia the same way her husband had, however, remains to be seen.

"She wants to accomplish the task that Alexei has tragically left incomplete: make Russia a free, democratic, peaceful and prosperous country," argues Russian economist Sergei Guriev. "She is also going to show to Putin that removing Aleksei will not destroy his cause." (*New York Times*, February 20, 2024)

NUCLEAR MODERNIZATION: MORE COMPLICATED THAN IT LOOKS

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, Moscow has employed nuclear saber-rattling as a method of deterrence in an attempt to weaken European and American support for its western neighbor. To that end, the Kremlin has regularly publicized advancements in the modernization of its nuclear arsenal. The true state of Russia's nuclear modernization effort, however, is both more complicated and more modest, a new policy paper has argued.

Writing for the Carnegie Endowment's *Politika* portal, analyst Maxim Starchak notes that, while "Russia is making major strides forward when it comes to rejuvenating its nuclear weapons systems, with modern arms now accounting for 95% of the country's nuclear arsenal (up from 91% a year ago)... other areas of the nuclear triad — for example ships and bombers — lag much further behind." Here, production issues and mismanagement have led to parts of the modernization process falling far behind schedule, with little hope of improvement. As a result, a complete transition to modern systems has been pushed back until later this year at the earliest, while "the new nuclear weapons hyped by the Kremlin will see out yet another year as nothing more than projects-in-development." (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 31, 2024)