



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

March 6:

The extensive campaign of cyberattacks and disinformation being carried out by Russia is "primarily meant to undermine the cohesion of Western societies and our partners" and requires a coordinated response from NATO nations, one of Europe's top defense officials has stressed. "We are seeing a new development where Russia takes its cyber activities to an unprecedented level," writes Danish Defense Minister Claus Hjort Frederiksen in *Fifth Domain*, a defense website, in the wake of the most recent Munich Security Conference. Russia's activism, Fredriksen notes, constitutes a threat and challenge to Europe and the United States - one necessitating greater investments from NATO partner nations in countervailing capabilities. "If Europe is willing to take greater responsibility, it must create credible deterrence; and for that to happen, more resources must be directed toward collective security for rapid response during a crisis and war," both in cyberspace and in the real world.

The Alliance, he emphasizes, has already begun this process, and there are welcome signs of commitment from the new administration in Washington to confronting Russia's influence campaigns. "I am hopeful and encouraged," Fredriksen concludes, "because today we invest more in collective security, both in Europe and the United States. This is a strong deterrent force. And because we expose Russia's actions and bring it into the light, our citizens will know what is going on."

March 7:

In what promises to be a major international scandal, British police have disclosed that a former Russian spy has been poisoned by a nerve agent in Salisbury, England. According to the *New York Times*, 66-year-old Sergei Skripal and his 33-year-old daughter, Yulia, were rendered seriously ill by what appears to be the intentional administration of a nerve agent in a "targeted" attack. It is believed that Skripal, a former Russian colonel who allegedly sold state secrets to the British, was targeted by Russian elements (presumably with the approval of the Kremlin) in delayed retaliation for his betrayal.

Skripal was convicted by a Russian court in 2006 of selling classified information to the UK, and served four years in prison. In 2010, he was released and sent to Britain as part of an exchange of spies between Moscow and London. The poisoning of him and his daughter now, nearly a decade later, has echoes of the infamous 2006 fatal poisoning of Russian agent-turned-whistleblower Alexander Litvinenko - an incident that also took place in England, and which is widely believed to have been orchestrated by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Russia's strategic partnership with Iran is expanding in an unexpected direction: grain. Bloomberg reports that Iran has agreed to buy as much as one million metric tons of wheat from Russia and Kazakhstan over the next half-decade, thereby establishing a lucrative new market for Russian agriculture.

March 8:

Russian presidential candidate Ksenia Sobchak has just been blacklisted in Ukraine, *The Moscow Times* reports. The journalist-turned-politician was placed on an "unofficial blacklist" by Ukrainian activists after she announced plans to visit the Crimean Peninsula for campaign purposes. Following her announcement, Sobchak was publicly placed by the Myrotvorets Center, a Kyiv-based activist website, on a list of "mercenaries, terrorists and their accomplices and Russian war criminals." The decision is curious, because Sobchak has publicly broken with the Russian government over the status of the Peninsula, which Russia annexed back in 2014. Earlier this year, she told reporters that she believes that, "according to international law, Crimea is Ukraine's. Period."

The biggest threat to Europe from Russia lies not in the Baltic, as generally believed, but in the Balkans, a top U.S. military commander has told Congress. The *Army Times* reports that, in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, U.S. Army Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, the Supreme Allied Commander Europe (SACEUR), laid out that while Russia is at work expanding its influence all over Europe, one of his particular concerns is the Balkans, an area that "we could have problems with in the future" as a result of growing Russian influence and control over vulnerable and sympathetic constituencies.