



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Africa; Latin America; Russia

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AMERICAN SANCTIONS

What role have sanctions played in constraining Russia's economy? A substantial one, according to a new study released by Bloomberg Economics. The report concludes that Russia's economy is currently more than 10 percent smaller than it was projected to be back in 2013. While the analysts behind the study note that low oil prices carry some of the blame for the underperformance, the gap between potential and actual growth is too substantial to be explained by energy markets alone. Moreover, the fact that the gap is consistently widening indicates that the U.S. sanctions regime is having a "prolonged impact," threatening the Kremlin's ambitious goals to increase GDP growth to more than three percent by 2021. (*The Moscow Times*, November 16, 2018)

RUSSIA'S RETURN TO LATIN AMERICA?

As the Trump administration prepares to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, Moscow is moving to counter Washington in a different geopolitical arena: Latin America. Russia is reportedly preparing to reopen a Soviet-era signals intelligence monitoring station in Cuba. Russian influence in Havana has been steadily growing under new Cuban president Miguel Diaz-Canel - a fact evidenced by multiple high-level meetings between Russian and Cuban leaders, and the recent signing of defense contracts between Moscow and Havana worth an estimated \$265 million. The end of the INF and the reopening of the Lourdes site has prompted a number of Russian commentators to speculate that Moscow may be planning to reopen all its old military bases on the Caribbean island, despite the fact that resource constraints could prevent the Kremlin from actually committing to such a proposal. (London *Daily Star*, November 17, 2018)

THE PROBLEM WITH RUSSIAN POLLING

Russian polling and public opinion surveys have long been understood to be unreliable, influenced by political pressure and the state-approved consensus. Even so, Russian cynicism towards polling is reaching new heights. The results of a new survey by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VTSIOM) indicates that 53 percent of Russians believe that poll results are deliberately fabricated in order to manipulate public opinion. Thirty-seven percent of those polled further expressed the belief that the results of opinion surveys do not reflect true public sentiment. The figure represents a significant worsening of sentiment over 2016 levels, when 22 percent of respondents shared that view. (RBC, November 14, 2018)

AN OPENING FOR MOSCOW IN HARARE

Will Zimbabwe be a stepping stone for greater Russian involvement in Africa? Andrey Maslov and Vadim Zaytsev, writing for the Carnegie Moscow Center, assert that the pressure of Western sanctions has driven Moscow to look for new zones in which to assert its influence. Zimbabwe, a traditionally Western-skeptic government, has long practiced a "Look East Policy" designed to encourage Chinese and Russian engagement, they argue. The country's political elites now view Moscow as a source of resources and investment, but not a political or economic threat - and thus a more attractive alternative to Beijing.

While part of the Kremlin's quest for soft power influence is taking place in the commodities sector, the Russians are playing in Zimbabwe's political space as well, the authors note. The ultimately victorious presidential candidate, Emmerson Mnangagwa, hired a number of Russian political consultants to advise his campaign this year, marking the first time since the end of the Cold War that Russia played an overt role in an African election. Although the Zimbabwean opposition stridently protested Russia's involvement, alleging that the election results had been falsified by pre-marked ballots shipped in from Russia, the protests were short-lived, and Mnangagwa has continued to welcome Russian engagement with open arms. Maslov and Zaytsev hypothesize that the "localized success could be the start of more systemic Russian participation in political processes across the African continent." (Carnegie Moscow Center, November 14, 2018)

BROWDER BACK IN THE KREMLIN'S CROSSHAIRS

One of the Kremlin's most vociferous critics is again being targeted by the Russian government. Russian authorities have leveled new legal charges against British businessman and human rights crusader Bill Browder, who has become a global advocate of targeted sanctions against Kremlin officials for their domestic and civic abuses. According to news reports, the new charges - filed by the Russian General Prosecutor's Office - accuse Browder "of forming a criminal group to embezzle funds in Russia," as well as implicating him in "the death of his employee, Sergei Magnitsky, in a Russian prison."

The latter charge is particularly striking - and egregious. Magnitsky, a lawyer employed by Browder's equity firm, died in a Russian prison in 2009 following his arrest on corruption charges after he uncovered official graft totaling hundreds of millions of dollars. Russian authorities are now reportedly investigating the poisoning of several of Browder's former business associates, for which they say the businessman is complicit, and have speculated that it was "highly likely" that Magnitsky was similarly poisoned - ostensibly by Browder. This, despite the fact that Magnitsky's death from medical complications as a result of neglect by his jailers has already been extensively documented in the public sphere. (Associated Press, November 20, 2018)