



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor 2282

January 2, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman, Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; NATO; Russia; Ukraine

A GUILTY PLEA IN THE BUTINA CASE

The espionage case against Russian student Maria Butina has cleared another legal hurdle. Arrested in July, Butina has been accused of working as a foreign agent in the Kremlin's campaign to influence American policy, particularly through the establishment of lines of communication with the National Rifle Association. Investigators have highlighted her work for sanctioned Russian bank official Alexander Torshin, her connections to Russian intelligence services, and multiple attempts to keep her work "incognito" as evidence of her guilt; her attorney, meanwhile, downplayed these activities as "mundane networking opportunities." As part of a plea agreement with federal prosecutors, Butina has now pleaded guilty to a single charge of conspiracy to act as an unregistered foreign agent. She will likely face deportation and up to five years in prison. (*PBS*, December 13, 2018)

BRUSSELS BACKS KYIV

In the wake of Russia's recent naval aggression in the Sea of Azov, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has announced that the Alliance will supply secure communications equipment to the Ukrainian armed forces. The contribution, which was announced during a meeting between Stoltenberg and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, will be considered part of NATO's 40 million Euro pledge to help strengthen Ukraine's military. The secretary general also gave encouragement to any former Soviet states aspiring to NATO membership to seek such status. (*Reuters*, December 13, 2018)

UKRAINE'S SAILORS FACE LEGAL CHARGES

The Kremlin is planning to prosecute the 24 Ukrainian sailors captured by the Russian Navy in the Sea of Azov in November – and to do so despite repeated calls from Washington for their release. Ever since the maritime crisis prompted President Trump to cancel his meeting with Vladimir Putin at the G20 summit, Washington has made future presidential engagement contingent on the sailors' release. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has countered that the Russian government continues to seek a top-level bilateral meeting with the United States, but that it would be inappropriate to "violat[e] the course of legal proceedings and the investigation that is under way against those who violated Russia's state borders." (*Reuters*, December 14, 2018)

MOSCOW'S OPEC COUP

Russia's hand in the new "OPEC+" format is growing stronger. When the bloc's oil ministers met in Vienna in December, Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak wielded outsized influence during the decision-making process that ultimately led to an agreement among the members to cut oil production by 800,000 barrels per day. Reportedly, Novak brokered bilateral arrangements with Saudi Arabia and Iran that helped break a negotiating impasse and paved the way for a rosy outcome for Moscow.

Moscow's maneuvers reportedly come at the expense of the bloc's weaker members. A disproportionate share of the resulting cut now falls to the group's smaller producers. Countries like Algeria, for example, were forced to accept cuts of upward of 6% from the 2016 baseline production level used during the discussion, while Russia managed to walk away with a cut of only 0.1%. (*Bloomberg*, December 16, 2018)

THE SCOPE OF RUSSIAN INTERFERENCE

The U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence has received two reports providing new insights on the reach and tactics of Russia's campaign to interfere with U.S. domestic politics and influence the outcome of the 2016 election. The reports, authored as part of a partnership between leading universities and network analysis firms, emphasize the cross-platform nature of the effort, which manipulated target demographics through Internet traffic that spanned not just Facebook and Twitter but also YouTube, Instagram, Pinterest, and other sites and email services as well. The analysis provides evidence that Russian online influence operations have been in play since 2009, but that the focus of these operations shifted from Russian domestic politics to U.S. politics sometime around 2013 and accelerated in 2014.

The researchers reported frustration with the cooperation they received from social media companies during this investigation, with much of the requested data provided in challenging formats that precluded full analysis. They noted that the Russians' "sloppiness" early on in the campaign (leaving identifying marks on their accounts that could be traced back to Russia) meant it could have been detected sooner, and thanks in part to the companies' "belated and uncoordinated response," Moscow has likely already shifted tactics. (*Washington Post*, December 17, 2018)