



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Corruption

NEW EVIDENCE OF FOUL PLAY IN JOURNALIST AMBUSH

New evidence has affirmed suspicions that three Russian journalists who were murdered last year in the Central African Republic were the victims not of an arbitrary crime but a carefully calculated plot. At the time they were killed, Kirill Radchenko, Alexander Rastorguyev, and Orkhan Dzhemal were investigating the activities of the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor that operates abroad in grey zone conflicts to extend the Kremlin's political, military, and economic influence – and has been sanctioned by the United States for doing so.

In the aftermath of the killing, Russian officials maintained that the journalists had merely been attacked by random criminals, despite the fact that their driver was unharmed and that none of their valuable equipment or fuel was stolen. Six months later, investigators have obtained phone logs spotlighting the shadowy connections between the men's driver, a CAR police officer who had trained extensively with the Wagner Group, and a countersurveillance trainer also employed by Wagner who were all in frequent communication on the day of the murders. Both the police officer and the trainer had recently acquired new cell phones, and the trainer had registered his phone under a false name with a forged passport. Despite this evidence, the Kremlin continues to shift the blame elsewhere; Vladimir Putin used his end-of-year news conference to defend Wagner's presence in the country and blame local bandits for the killings. (CNN, January 10, 2019)

MEET THE "KREMLIN KIDS"

A rising generation of Russian leaders, many of them the offspring of today's Kremlin insiders, is beginning to reshape Russian politics. In a 2018 study for the Polish Institute of International Affairs, scholars Bartosz Bielszczuk and Agnieszka Legucka describe these "Kremlin kids" who are migrating into positions of power in the Russian state. "A growing group of so-called 'Kremlin Kids' hold significant, even though not visible, positions in the power structures, enabling Russian elites to maintain influence and control through personal and family links," they note. "Such a controlled transition will augment a political system that has the features of a kleptocracy and clan-like organisation."

Examples of this new nepotistic class abound. Dmitry Patrushev, the son of National Security Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, was appointed in May 2018 to serve as Minister of Agriculture in President Putin's cabinet, marking the first time that a "Kremlin kid" had overtly entered Russian politics. But more tacit positions of power have long been occupied by this cohort, which includes the children of oligarchs such as Boris Rotenberg and Sergei Roldugin and Kremlin insiders like Igor Sechin and Sergei Lavrov. Cumulatively, Bielszczuk and Legucka note, these rising leaders represent "the future power elite of Russia," who can be expected to "strengthen their parents' position in the Russian system and consolidate the corrosive political and business system in Russia: nepotism, corruption, and money laundering." (Polish Institute of International Affairs, July 20, 2018)

CHECHNYA'S ANTI-LGBT CAMPAIGN

A new campaign of repression against homosexuality in Chechnya is renewing international concern over internal conditions in Russia's most controversial region. At least two people have been killed so far in what observers have described as a renewed crackdown on gay men and women by the government of regional strongman Ramzan Kadyrov. The deaths, reportedly as a result of officially-sanctioned torture, mark an uptick in the ongoing campaign of repression against LGBT individuals in the majority-Muslim republic. No fewer than forty people have been imprisoned and tortured so far as a result, researchers say.

The campaign, observers note, is taking place with the tacit blessing of the Kremlin. Writing in *The Moscow Times*, Natalia Prilutskaya of Amnesty International charges that the Russian government has in the past been complicit in the excesses of Kadyrov's rule, refusing to pursue criminal charges against officials credibly accused of torture and horrific abuse. And because they have not, Prilutskaya charges, rights activists braced for the worst, understanding that "without accountability it was only a matter of time before the Chechen authorities resumed their atrocities. Sadly, they have already been proved right." (London *Independent*, January 14, 2019; *The Moscow Times*, January 17, 2019)