



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Middle East; Russia

A COLD WAR SPY DRAMA FOR THE MODERN AGE

New details have surfaced regarding the recent espionage-related detention of American citizen and ex-Marine Paul Whelan in Moscow. Russian news agency Rosbalt has reported that Whelan met with a Russian citizen in the lobby of Moscow's famous Metropol Hotel, where he received a flash drive that allegedly contained contact information for Russian security service employees. He was arrested immediately afterward, caught "red-handed" with state secrets, in the words of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Whelan's lawyer maintains his client's innocence, reiterating that Whelan only traveled to Russia to attend a wedding and that he believed the flash drive contained innocuous travel images. The strange circumstances of Whelan's arrest and detention have prompted speculation that the Kremlin is seeking payback or even a prisoner swap for Russian agent Maria Butina, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy charges in a DC court in December.

However, Daniel Hoffman, the former CIA station chief in Moscow, sees a more nefarious purpose behind the fabricated charges. He contends that Whelan's arrest was designed by Russian intelligence operatives – likely at President Vladimir Putin's explicit direction – in order to "ramp up political hype" about Butina's case in DC and foment divisions in Congress, where the House of Representatives is newly controlled by Democrats. (*NPR*, January 22, 2019; *The Washington Times*, January 23, 2019)

OFFICIALLY-SANCTIONED REPRESSION, EXTORTION IN GROZNY

New details are emerging about the extent of the renewed anti-LGBT campaign now being waged by authorities in Russia's republic of Chechnya. Activists have charged that local officials have demanded that family members kill outright relatives who happen to be homosexual, transgender or bisexual. "Chechen authorities demanded that relatives punish their gay family members by executing them," one of human rights campaigner told *The Daily Beast*. "Several people who managed to escape have been raped with police clubs and tortured with electricity." Another has revealed that local police have taken to extorting the families of LGBT individuals, demanding as much as 1 million rubles (\$15,000) to avoid punishment and public disclosure. (*The Daily Beast*, January 18, 2019)

A DIPLOMATIC APPEAL FOR COOPERATION AT DAVOS...

Are Russia and the United States on a collision course? American officials don't think so - but they acknowledge the growing difficulty of tamping down tensions between the two countries. In remarks before the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo insisted that Moscow and Washington are not "doomed to a Cold War rivalry," but that "it has been a struggle" to reduce the risk of confrontation with Vladimir Putin's Russia. According to Pompeo, whether the Russian government changes "its outlook and behavior" will determine whether the two countries can forge a constructive working relationship, moving forward. Should Russia "return to the right course of actions... that lead them down the path of the rule of law and order and liberty," Pompeo said, "our two nations can prosper and grow alongside of each other. We are not destined to be antagonists." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 23, 2019)

...AS AMERICA'S SPIES ASSESS THE RUSSIA THREAT

On January 29th, Director of National Intelligence Daniel Coats testified before Congress regarding global challenges confronting the United States. Russia figured prominently in the Director's statement for the record, which warned that the Kremlin's successes in supporting the Assad regime in Syria have set the stage for even greater Russian activism in North Africa and the Middle East. According to the study, Russia now has "heightened confidence," and is seeking "to boost its military presence and political influence in the Mediterranean and Red Seas, increase its arms sales, expand information operations in Europe, and mediate conflicts, including engaging in the Middle East Peace Process and Afghanistan reconciliation."

Here, Russian perceptions of U.S. weakness and disengagement play a significant role. "Russia seeks to capitalize on perceptions of US retrenchment and power vacuums, which it views the United States is unwilling or unable to fill, by pursuing relatively low-cost options, including influence campaigns, cyber tools, and limited military interventions," the study notes. (Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 29, 2019)