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KYIV COURTS EUROPE

The government of Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko is angling for closer European integration. Poroshenko has formally signed a constitutional amendment committing his country to becoming a member of both the Atlantic Alliance and the European Union. In an address before the country's legislature, Poroshenko said that he sees securing a Euro-Atlantic trajectory for Ukraine to be the "strategic mission" of his administration, and laid out that Ukraine should "submit a request for EU membership and receive a NATO membership action plan no later than 2023." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 19, 2019)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The initiative represents the latest move in an ongoing effort by authorities in Kyiv to hedge against ongoing Russian aggression by more closely tethering Ukraine to Europe - a step that European leaders like European Council president Donald Tusk have wholeheartedly endorsed. The move also has distinctly domestic political overtones, however, allowing Poroshenko to burnish his pro-Western credentials ahead of Ukraine's looming presidential election, which is slated to take place in late March.]

PARSING PUTIN'S "STATE OF THE NATION"

In his most recent State of the Nation address, which took place on February 20th, Russian President Vladimir Putin focused heavily on his government's mounting domestic troubles. In the face of declining approval ratings and a challenging economic environment burdened by Western sanctions, Putin made sweeping promises to revitalize the country and modernize infrastructure. Citing ambitious projects like the construction of a new railway bridge to the Crimean Peninsula, planned IT improvements in schools, and simplification of the foreign visa process, he vowed to combat poverty, reverse the falling birth rate, and boost Russia's annual economic growth above three percent by 2021.

Putin's message on defense was just as bold: he condemned the U.S. decision to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty as a smokescreen for the American development of missile defense systems intended to undercut Russia. While denying that Russia wanted confrontation with the U.S. or with NATO, he threatened to target the United States should it choose to deploy intermediate-range missiles in Europe, asking "Can they count? I'm sure they can. Let them count the speed and range of the weapons systems we are developing." (*The Moscow Times*, February 20, 2019; *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 20, 2019)

A CYBER CAMPAIGN AGAINST EU THINK TANKS

A number of European think tanks have confirmed that they have been hacked in the run-up to this year's EU parliamentary elections. The German Council on Foreign Relations, the Aspen Institute in Europe, and the German Marshall Fund all were identified by Microsoft as the victims of cyber attacks most likely carried out by Strontium (also known as Fancy Bear), a hacker group linked directly to the Russian government. Microsoft added that the nature of the information targeted at these organizations provides additional confirmation that the attack was indeed orchestrated by a nation state, rather than by random cyber criminals. The hack has prompted the targeted organizations to bolster their cyber defenses, and Microsoft and Google have both offered to provide various threat-detection systems to think tanks and other political organizations to help strengthen their digital infrastructure. In a public statement, the president of the German Marshall Fund commented that the attacks were "a reminder that the assault on these [democratic] values is real and relentless." (*Financial Times*, February 20, 2019)

ANOTHER PUTIN CRITIC MEETS HIS END

Igor Malashenko, a former Russian media executive and political analyst, was found dead in his home in Spain last month. Malashenko was the founder and president of NTV, a major independent TV channel critical of the Kremlin until the Russian government bought it out in the year 2000. He also worked on Boris Yeltsin's campaign in the 1990s and most recently served as the campaign manager for Ksenia Sobchak in last year's presidential elections. The Russian media is currently reporting that the death was a suicide, although no official sources have confirmed that assessment. (*Fox News*, February 25, 2019)