



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; Economic Sanctions; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; NATO; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

CRIMEA SANCTIONS CONTINUE

Comprehensive U.S. sanctions against Moscow for its annexation of the Crimean Peninsula will not be ending any time soon. Earlier this month, the Trump administration gave formal notice that it would extend the declaration of a national emergency with respect to Russia's actions for an additional year, through March 2020, posting a formal statement to that effect on the White House website and in the *Federal Register* as well as providing notice to Congress. In justifying the continuation, the Administration cited its determination that Russia's "actions and policies... continue to pose an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States."

America, moreover, isn't alone. Shortly after the White House decision, both the European Union and Canada joined the U.S. in imposing a new round of sanctions on Moscow. The fresh designations targeted individuals and entities in the Russian security services and the military who played a role in last year's Kerch Strait naval skirmish, when Russian ships attacked and seized three Ukrainian vessels and their crews. Officials underscored the coordinated nature of the move and their goal of checking Russian aggression, although some commentators have since criticized the belated timing of the decision to retaliate for the Kerch Strait incident. (WhiteHouse.gov, March 4, 2019; Reuters, March 15, 2019)

SOME COMPETITION FOR THE KREMLIN IN THE ARCTIC

It has been a full decade since the Kremlin formally released its arctic strategy (an English translation of which is available here). During that time, the Russian government's machinations in the region - involving the deployment of dedicated troops, the new demarcation of boundaries and the establishment of permanent military bases - has gone largely unchallenged. But now, a new player is getting into the Arctic game, and Russian officials are increasingly nervous.

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference in mid-February, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov expressed his government's concerns over NATO's expanding activities in the Arctic region. "We note the increased activities by NATO members [in the region]," Lavrov said. "We discussed this with our Norwegian neighbours. We want to understand what kind of mandate NATO is going to have in the Arctic." Lavrov is the latest Russian official to express concern over the Alliance's growing focus on the Arctic zone, which includes recent military drills (dubbed "Trident Juncture") to protect the Nordic states, as well as expanded authorities for the bloc's new Joint Force Command. (*Sputnik*, February 16, 2019)

NEXT UP: RUXIT?

Russia's mounting displeasure with Europe could lead the Kremlin to exit the Council of Europe in the near future, thereby removing itself from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. The move, human rights campaigners say, would be far-reaching - robbing European nations of a crucial mechanism by which to exercise pressure over Russia's domestic processes and human rights practices. "For Vladimir Putin, Council of Europe membership is certainly seen as being part of the civilized world and an exit has always been considered an unwelcome scenario, notes Tatyana Stanovaya of the Paris-based R.Politik consultancy. "However there may not be another way out in the current circumstances." (Agence France Presse, March 15, 2019)

LESIN AUTOPSY HINTS AT FOUL PLAY

The investigation into the 2015 death of former Kremlin confidante and media czar Mikhail Lesin has unearthed still more evidence that it was not an accident, as originally supposed. A recently-released report from the Washington, DC medical examiner's office outlines that Lesin suffered from a fractured neck bone "at or near the time" of his death in a Dupont Circle hotel in November 2015. The report stops short of attributing Lesin's demise to foul play, noting that the bone break near his jaw could have occurred after his death. Nevertheless, the finding calls into question the initial ruling by DC authorities in his death - namely, that Lesin had died as a result of blunt force injuries incurred in multiple falls while under the influence of alcohol or narcotics. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 16, 2019)