



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor 2303

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**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Russia

## IDEOLOGICAL REEDUCATION MAKES A COMEBACK

The Kremlin appears to be searching for new ways to control subversive ideas, particularly among Russian youth. At a recent conference in Udmurtia, Russian National Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev remarked that new software blockers have been installed on computers in Russian schools to restrict access to websites that Moscow claims increase the rate of juvenile crime. Patrushev also alluded to plans to start sending juvenile offenders to military-patriotic re-education camps. The proposal follows last year's establishment of a patriotic directorate in the Russian military and the criminalization of recruitment of underage protestors, both of which are reminiscent of Soviet-era practices that many Russia-watchers believe could be "the start of a wider renaissance in ideological education that could spread to schools and colleges." (*The Moscow Times*, March 13, 2019)

## SOME BELATED JUSTICE FOR BORIS NEMTSOV?

Russian opposition politician and civil society leader Vladimir Kara-Murza is applauding a new measure in the U.S. Congress to punish Ramzan Kadyrov, the violent leader of Chechnya with a sordid history of involvement in torture and extrajudicial killings, for the February 2015 assassination of former deputy Prime Minister Boris Nemtsov. Five Chechen suspects were arrested for Nemtsov's murder, but Kadyrov (who almost certainly gave the order for the attack) remained untouchable, even receiving the Russian Order of Honor from President Vladimir Putin ten days later.

The resolution, which passed the U.S. House of Representatives in a 416-1 vote in March, condemns Putin and Kadyrov, outlines steps to investigate Nemtsov's murder, and vows to hold accountable those found responsible through sanctions and other punitive measures. Freshman Congressman and former Assistant Secretary of State Tom Malinowski proposed an additional amendment that would trigger an investigation of Kadyrov's financial activities outside of Russia – specifically in the Gulf states, where the strongman maintains significant financial interests. Kara-Murza writes that this resolution may be the first to hit Kadyrov where it truly hurts (previous Western visa restrictions and financial sanctions imposed after Nemtsov's death had only a symbolic effect, since none of Kadyrov's holdings are in the U.S. or Europe). (*Washington Post*, March 14, 2019)

## BRUSSELS CALLS OUT MOSCOW

On the fifth anniversary of Russia's annexation of Crimea, the European Union's foreign policy chief took the opportunity to read the proverbial riot act to the Kremlin. In a public statement, Federica Mogherini reaffirmed the bloc's commitment to Ukrainian sovereignty, repeatedly condemned the annexation as a violation of international law, and pointed to Russia's aggression in the Kerch Strait as "a reminder of the negative effects of the illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula on regional stability." She further criticized Russia's militarization of the peninsula, its plan to hold Crimean elections, and the troubling restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and assembly that currently prevail there. Russian President Vladimir Putin, for his part, made an official visit to the peninsula to mark the occasion. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 17, 2019)

## THE PRICE OF DISSENT IN CHECHNYA

A controversial legal case in Chechnya has resulted in a harsh sentence for one of the region's leading human rights advocates. Oyub Titiyev, who runs Chechnya's Memorial Human Rights Center, must now serve four years in a penal colony after a judge found him guilty of possession of marijuana last month. Titiyev maintains that the drugs were planted on him by police during a traffic stop in order to punish him for his work and disrupt Memorial's operations. A Human Rights Watch official commented that "The guilty verdict against Oyub Titiyev is gross injustice to him, a disgrace to the Russian criminal justice system, and a further sign that Ramzan Kadyrov, the governor of Chechnya, will be emboldened to silence reporting on human rights abuses." (*The Moscow Times*, March 18, 2019)

## **THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION**

A Russian journalist is sharing her story of infiltrating the infrastructure of Russian disinformation. In 2014, Lyudmila Savchuk, a journalist from St. Petersburg, answered a job posting from the Internet Research Agency, hoping to find out more about the notoriously secret operation. After two-and-a-half months working at the IRA as a writer, she came forward to expose key details about the agency's inner workings, including its different departments (news, "social media seeders," and "demotivators" producing memes), its high daily quotas for questionable content, and its ties to Kremlin ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has since been the target of U.S. sanctions for his role in Russia's online meddling.

At first, Savchuk's efforts seemed to bear fruit. She was the first to publicly expose Russia's disinformation campaign, and she even won a lawsuit against the IRA for labor code violations. But ever since, she has received scant praise for her troubles. In fact, after she went public with her criticism of Prigozhin, Facebook deactivated her account – she suspects that trolls flooded the platform with complaints about her profile until it was removed. Her access has since been restored, but Savchuk says she no longer feels that the fight against disinformation is winnable. (*Business Insider*, March 18, 2019)