



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2313

June 13, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Corruption; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

### **CORRUPTION IN THE FSB**

Three high-ranking officials of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) have been arrested on charges of embezzlement and bribery. Colonel Kirill Cherkalin and two subordinates, Dmitry Frolov and Andrey Vasilyev, stand accused of amassing more than 12 billion rubles (\$185.6 million) in illicit assets, reportedly through protection rackets, unlawful sale of private information, and other illegal activity. The three men are currently in jail awaiting legal proceedings. (*Meduza*, May 17, 2019)

### **A RAPPROCHEMENT WITH EUROPE ON HUMAN RIGHTS?**

After nearly five years, Moscow appears poised to reclaim full membership in the Council of Europe, the continent's primary human rights body. The Council suspended Russia's voting rights after its 2014 annexation of Crimea, and Russia retaliated by halting its annual 90 million Euro contribution to the Council's budget – a figure representing seven percent of total member contributions. Moscow has promised to resume paying that sum as part of the new agreement. France and Germany were the biggest proponents of Russia's return on the grounds that it would be easier to monitor and contend with Russian human rights issues if Moscow was readmitted. Thirty-seven other countries also supported the proposed agreement, with only Ukraine, Georgia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Armenia opposing the move. The agreement, which deliberately sidestepped any discussion of Crimea's status, makes it possible for Russia to participate fully in the organization's June meeting. (*The Moscow Times*, May 17, 2019)

### **SABOTAGE IN EASTERN EUROPE**

Ukrainian officials have acquired intelligence that they say implicates the Kremlin in a covert campaign to exploit their country's ethnic divisions and alienate Kyiv from its European neighbors. In a manner reminiscent of Soviet tactics during the Cold War, when KGB spies conducted false-flag operations in West Germany, the Kremlin now appears to be leveraging the far-right movement in Eastern Europe to attempt attacks on ethnic Hungarian, Polish, and Romanian groups in Ukraine.

In one recent incident, two Polish fascists were allegedly paid to firebomb a Hungarian cultural center in Uzhgorod; although the attack was ultimately unsuccessful, the ongoing trial of the culprits has shed new light on Ukraine's complaints. While most European countries have not fallen for the trap, the campaign is reaping rewards in Hungary, where Kremlin-friendly president Viktor Orban has adopted a staunchly anti-Ukraine stance and blocked NATO engagement with Kyiv, citing violations of the rights of ethnic Hungarians who live in western Ukraine. (*Wall Street Journal*, May 17, 2019)

### **RUSSIA'S ELECTORATE FEELS SILENCED**

Regardless of their attitudes toward Russian President Vladimir Putin, most Russians agree they will not have a voice in choosing his successor. This is one of many conclusions reached by the independent Levada Center after a series of focus groups held with Moscow residents about their political forecasts regarding Putin's plans for the next election in 2024. Notably, few respondents were aware that Putin is term-limited by the Russian constitution, and thus assumed he would run again in the next election. Pro-Putin respondents praised his strength and authority on the international stage, while more negative responses derided the president as being power-hungry.

Those who thought Putin might leave in 2024 speculated it would be for health reasons or due to failed social reforms. In that case, respondents agreed that a successor hand-picked by Putin – such as former president Dmitry Medvedev or current defense minister Sergei Shoigu – would easily beat any opposition candidate. The rationales for these responses ranged from trust in Putin's ability to choose the right person and provide for the country's stability to a resignation that the elections are merely a political façade and that Russia cannot manage a truly democratic transition of power. Most also agreed that the successor would be a man, since "the country is huge," Russian politics are tough, and the country cannot afford to show weakness in the international arena." (*The Moscow Times*, May 17, 2019)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Given the effect of Russia's increasingly authoritarian political climate on pollsters and respondents alike, the results of public opinion surveys in Russia should be viewed with some caution.]

