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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Military Innovation; Corruption; Russia; Africa; Baltics

THE STRANGE CASE OF IVAN GOLUNOV

In the latest episode of media repression in Russia, Ivan Golunov, a journalist with the Latvia-based *Meduza* web portal, was taken into police custody on June 9th after two officers claimed to have found cocaine and drug paraphernalia in his Moscow home. At his first appearance in court, Golunov denied the drug dealing charges against him and broke down in tears, and the judge ordered that he be placed under house arrest until August 7th. He was subsequently taken to a hospital with a concussion and a broken rib as a result of beatings he received after his arrest. Golunov's investigative work for *Meduza* has included articles on a corrupt Moscow deputy mayor and unscrupulous business practices in the money lending and funeral industries in Russia, and human rights organizations, and his fellow journalists believe this provoked retaliation from authorities.

However, the massive protests that erupted in support of the journalist ultimately forced the government's hand. All the leading business papers ran headlines proclaiming "We are Golunov," and "single-picket" protests (which skirt official permit requirements by having people protest "individually" in front of a line of reinforcements) studied with prominent public figures persisted for hours outside police headquarters. Ultimately, all charges against Golunov were dropped, and Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev requested the firing of two senior police officers involved in the operation. Anna Nemtsova, writing for *The Atlantic*, argues that the unflattering media coverage of Golunov's arrest eclipsed the high-profile St. Petersburg International Economic Forum – an unpalatable outcome for Russian President Vladimir Putin, and likely an indication that the operation was hatched at a much lower level without Kremlin authorization. She cites the arrest of American businessman Michael Calvey and the poisoning of ex-spy Sergei Skripal as further evidence that "there is a degree of freelancing by security officers and government officials who believe they are carrying out the Kremlin's ultimate bidding, or at least have its passive acquiescence, only to see draconian measures like arresting or attacking critics backfire." (Riyadh *Al Arabiya*, June 9, 2019; *The Atlantic*, June 11, 2019)

GENETIC PASSPORTS FOR RUSSIAN SOLDIERS

A new use for genetic data is in the works at the Russian Academy of Sciences. In conjunction with the Kirov Military Medical Academy, scientists are seeking to create a "genetic passport" that can identify a person's "predispositions" and then use this profile to optimize each soldier to the most appropriate military role. Alexander Sergeev, who heads the Academy, specified that the project will assess both physiological and psychological traits, allowing the military to test the individual's reactions to stress and assess the job that will allow him or her to perform best. Russian President Vladimir Putin raised a similar concept publicly in March, calling for genetic passports for all Russian citizens to be created as part of his decree on chemical and biological safety. (*Forbes*, June 8, 2019)

GRAVESTONE PROTESTS CONTINUE

A morbid new form of public protest is making the rounds in Russia. In June, an anonymous activist in Voronezh erected a mock gravestone for Vladimir Putin with a 2019 date of death and an inscription reading "Incredible thief and liar. Political corpse." The Voronezh Putin gravestone appears to be part of a coordinated campaign, as similar tombstones have appeared in eight cities all over the country (and one in Germany) since March. Opposition group Agit Rossia, which describes itself as a community "united by a common desire to fight against dictatorship and totalitarianism, and Putinist propaganda" has claimed responsibility for some of the gravestones and helped spread their images online. In a similar effort, activists in Yekaterinburg have used the city's walls to paint gravestones commemorating the deaths of religion, freedom of assembly, and freedom of expression in the country. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 9, 2019)

RUSSIA'S THIN BLUE LINE CRUMBLES

Low morale continues to fuel an exodus of Russian law enforcement personnel. Mikhail Pashkin, head of the national police union, has warned that poor working conditions, a lack of empowerment, and low salaries are among the factors driving former officers out of the police force and into other security-focused jobs (or to side roles with criminal organizations). Pashkin notes that in some areas, up to 15 percent of police billets are now left unfilled, which has led the National Anti-Corruption Committee to warn that the force's effectiveness is at roughly half of what it should be, foreshadowing a likely increase of law enforcement duties taken on by military and riot control units. (*Window on Eurasia*, June 9, 2019)

THE KREMLIN SCHEMES IN AFRICA

Moscow has an ambitious strategy to expand its strategic foothold in Africa, and it is outsourcing the work to a private paramilitary organization. Leaked documents obtained by the Dossier Center, an investigative organization based in London and funded by Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky, reveal that the Wagner Group is coordinating with the Russian Foreign and Defense Ministries to increase the country's influence in no fewer than thirteen African states. In the documents, each target nation is ranked by the level of cooperation achieved so far with that country's leadership, with the Central African Republic, Sudan, and Madagascar all ranked highest. The documents define "project" categories and detail achievements to date – facilitating the election of Russia-friendly candidates, getting rid of officials deemed too friendly to France, and passing military, political and economic reforms designed to keep their favored leaders in office while suppressing protests and critical press coverage. (London *Guardian*, June 11, 2019)