



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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HIGH DRAMA IN COURT

A controversial court case against a group of Russian youth activists may fall apart after a key witness changed his testimony last month. The case revolves around eight young members of the so-called "New Greatness Movement," a political group critical of Russian president Vladimir Putin's government who were charged with extremism. The defendants were arrested in March 2018, and four had been held in pre-trial detention, sparking peaceful protests of support in several major cities across Russia. The prosecution's case against them relied on testimony from group member Pavel Rebrovsky, who had claimed that the other defendants expressed a desire to commit radical or extremist acts. However, on July 8th, Rebrovsky recanted his testimony, claiming that investigators pressured him to lie or else face a ten-year terrorism sentence. The defendants claim that their original online chat, created as a space to criticize the government, was infiltrated by a Federal Security Service agent who prompted them to expand into a political movement shortly before their arrest. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 10, 2019)

POLITICAL PRISONERS PROLIFERATE

A leading Russian human rights activist is beseeching the international community to acknowledge the plight of political prisoners in his country. In a July hearing with the United Nations Human Rights Council, Vladimir Kara-Murza, deputy chairman of the Open Russia Foundation, asserted that the number of political prisoners currently detained in Russia is 297 - six times more than it was just four years ago. According to Kara-Murza, the current level vastly exceeds that of the 1970s, when Soviet human rights activist Andrei Sakharov claimed that 126 people were being held as "prisoners of conscience." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 10, 2019)

RUSSIAN MONEY IN ITALIAN POLITICS

One morning last year at Moscow's most renowned hotel, representatives of Italian politician Matteo Salvini met secretly with Russian officials to discuss how Russian money might be covertly funneled into Italian politics to support Salvini and his far-right "Lega" party. News website *Buzzfeed* obtained a recording of the secret negotiations at the Metropol, attended by Salvini's top aides and a number of Russians whose identity has not been verified. In the recording, Salvini's "sherpa to Russia" Gianluca Savoini describes plans to create a coalition of pro-Russian nationalist parties all across Europe, and lays out terms for a major Russian oil company to sell three million metric tons of oil to an Italian supplier at a \$65 million discount – the discrepancy would then be funneled to "Lega," while the Russian intermediaries would skim a cut off the top. Although it remains unclear if the terms of the deal were implemented, or if "Lega" actually received any Russian money at all, the expose describes it as "the first hard evidence of Russia's clandestine attempts to fund Europe's nationalist movements... and a clear model for how exactly Russia uses commerce to mask naked exchanges of money and power." (*BuzzFeed*, July 10, 2019)

MOSCOW SEEKS TO PRESERVE ITS SUDANESE STAKE

Amid the political crisis in Sudan, Moscow has intensified its efforts to stifle the Sudanese opposition and block international critiques of the governing Transitional Military Council (TMC). Even prior to the overthrow of Sudanese dictator Omar al-Bashir earlier this year, Russia had been sending private military contractors (PMCs) to train Sudanese military officers while also advising the government on ways to spread disinformation about the protestors campaigning against it. Moscow is amplifying that support by spreading its own narrative through Russian media lionizing the TMC, dismissing allegations that it has used violence to repress the demonstrations, and delegitimizing the protestors as criminals.

In doing so, Moscow is reportedly seeking to protect its substantial investments in the country's defense, mining, and energy industries, its lucrative weapons sales to Khartoum, and its potential plans to build a military base on the country's Red Sea coast. More liberal Russian media outlets have also noted that Moscow's relationship with Sudan is increasing its alignment and influence with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – both of which are traditional U.S. allies. (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 11, 2019)

TREASON CHARGES FOR MOSCOW RESEARCHER?

The mysterious detention of a Moscow scientist is arousing suspicion among human rights monitors for its possible connection to another ongoing espionage case. 77 year old Sergei Meshcheryakov, a researcher at the Central Research Institute for Machine Building, was placed under house arrest in July, with no details provided regarding the charges against him. However, the Memorial Human Rights Center is calling Meshcheryakov a political prisoner, and some are questioning whether his arrest is related to the current prosecution of his former colleague Viktor Kudryavtsev, who was arrested last year on suspicion of turning over classified hypersonic technology data to an organization in Belgium. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 15, 2019)