



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

ISRAELI POLITICIANS COURT RUSSIAN EXPATS

Russian immigrants and their families in Israel are enjoying a new day in the spotlight. The Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics reports that the former Soviet expat demographic represents 12 percent of eligible Israeli voters (roughly 15 to 16 seats in the country's parliament), and politicians are starting to pay attention. Long overlooked during the country's campaign season, a growing number of candidates are beginning to run ads in Russian and acknowledge concerns specific to this demographic. One recent study suggests that this demographic has overwhelmingly voted for Yisrael Beytenu, a secular nationalist party, with center-right Likud as a popular second choice, and support for the left-leaning Labor party declining dramatically since 2015. Some academics have explained these voting trends (which are particularly consistent among older members of the demographic) as the result of a preference for strong leadership after witnessing the chaos wrought by the "drunken democracy" of Russia in the 1990s. (*Times of Israel*, July 26, 2019)

MEDIA BATTLE WITH BRITAIN ESCALATES

Kremlin-funded broadcaster RT was hit with a \$248,740 fine in late July after British media authorities determined that it had violated impartiality rules. The British regulator Ofcom has consistently objected to RT's failure to meet these requirements, particularly in its coverage of the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria, as well as of the 2018 Salisbury Novichok attack and subsequent investigation, and it had long warned RT to desist or face serious consequences. Russia immediately protested the fine as "part of an anti-Russian campaign."

A harsher response was soon to come. Less than a week later, Russian regulator ROSKOMNADZOR announced that it would introduce legislation to the country's parliament that would allow it to apply the same standards used by Ofcom in order to fine foreign media working in Moscow. A spokesperson for the regulator called it an application of "the principle of reciprocity in the case of discriminatory attitudes toward Russian media abroad." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 26, 2019; *U.S. News and World Report*, August 1, 2019)

BATTLEGROUND: MOSCOW

A long-building wave of civil unrest crested on July 27th when Russian police arrested more than 1,300 individuals at a demonstration in central Moscow. The rally was one of several organized in late July in protest of the decision by election officials to bar more than a dozen opposition candidates from participating in September's City Duma elections. Thousands of people gathered in the streets to call for fair elections and the inclusion of all qualified candidates on the ballots. In response, local authorities pursued multiple measures to deter the gatherings, including opening a formal criminal investigation into the protests, arresting principal organizer Alexei Navalny along with most of the opposition candidates in question, and raiding their offices and apartments.

However, public discontent was only more inflamed by the mass arrests on the 27th; multiple violent clashes with riot police broke out as the day wore on, with the rally breaking into smaller, scattered groups chanting "Russia will be free" and "Russia without Putin." Officials, including the city's mayor Sergei Sobyanin, issued dire warnings that any follow-up protests would be met with harsh measures. Indeed, at a subsequent protest in Moscow on August 3rd, at least 600 of the 1,500 attendees were detained, often violently. Since protestors were unable to obtain a necessary permit from Moscow authorities, the rally had been billed a "Saturday stroll."

After the protests, retaliation by law enforcement against key organizers appeared to continue: for example, an investigation on money laundering charges was opened into anti-corruption group FBK. Lyubov Sobol, one of the opposition candidates and a close lieutenant of Navalny's who was arrested before she could even reach the protests, asserted that the government is "doing everything they can to try to intimidate the opposition... That is why it is important to come out today to show that Muscovites are not afraid of provocation and they are ready to continue to stand up for their rights." (*The Moscow Times*, July 27, 2019; *BBC News*, August 3, 2019)