



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Iran

NAVALNY POISONED?

Alexei Navalny, Russia's leading opposition figure, suffered an alarming medical emergency while in the custody of Russian authorities last month. Navalny was 10 days into a 30-day jail sentence for his role in organizing the recent protests in Moscow when he suffered the onset of symptoms that included acute facial swelling, severe body rashes, and eye problems. He was temporarily released to be treated for an allergic reaction but then was transferred back to jail – despite the opposition of Anastasia Vassilieva, his personal physician, who asserts that his illness was not an allergic reaction but the result of nefarious causes. Noting that Navalny had never suffered from allergies before, Vassilieva told reporters that deliberate exposure to a toxic chemical agent was a much more likely explanation. She also wrote on Facebook that the officials handling Navalny were "acting strangely," that his diagnosis had been kept hidden from his family and legal team, and that she was denied access from checking up on him again. "There are lies all around," she warned.

Although further testing is underway to determine the cause of illness, Navalny offered his own explanation via a post on his website. He described how after ten unremarkable days in the same cell, his symptoms came on suddenly until his eyes were swollen shut. He listed a number of other high-profile poisoning attacks clearly conducted by the Russian government against its critics, including former intelligence officers Sergei Skripal and Alexander Litvinenko, as well as journalist Yuri Shchekochikhin. Navalny himself was the victim of a previous physical attack; in 2017, an unknown attacker threw an acidic antiseptic dye in his face, causing temporary loss of vision in his affected eye. (*BBC News*, July 29, 2019; *New York Times*, July 29, 2019)

RUSSIA TARGETS CRITICAL JOURNALISTS

Bellingcat, an investigative news group that has written critically about Russian government activities, has confirmed that its journalists were targeted by a sophisticated email phishing campaign. While the attempted penetration of Bellingcat's systems was ultimately unsuccessful, the organization's founder tweeted that it was "almost certainly linked to our work on Russia." ProtonMail, the ultra-secure server that hosts Bellingcat's email services, agreed that evidence left behind by the hackers pointed to "an attack of Russian origin." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 28, 2019)

THE 2017 RADIATION CLOUD, EXPLAINED

An international team of scientists has uncovered new data linking a mysterious cloud of radiation released in 2017 to an accident at a secretive nuclear reprocessing facility in central Russia. The cloud, which was detected in places as far-flung as eastern Europe and the Caribbean, was determined to be 30-100 times as radioactive as the radiation released by the Fukushima nuclear disaster in 2011, although its dilution rendered it harmless to the people below it. The 1,300 atmospheric measurements and concentration levels collected by the team helped geolocate the cloud's release to the Ural Mountains. The region is home to the Mayak Production Association, a primary point of production for the plutonium used in Russia's nuclear weapons. Moreover, the samples contained a massive quantity of radioactive ruthenium-106, an isotope produced during the kind of reprocessing of nuclear fuel that takes place at Mayak. According to the team, the sheer quantity of ruthenium-106 suggests that some kind of accident during reprocessing caused the cloud, rather than a simple release of gas. While Mayak was long suspected to be the source of the cloud, the new data provides strong evidence to counter the strong denials from Moscow that any kind of accident took place there. (*Live Science*, July 29, 2019)

POLL NUMBERS GRIM FOR ANOTHER PUTIN TERM

President Vladimir Putin's approval ratings continue to decline amid growing discontent among Russians. According to the latest poll released by the independent Levada Center, 38 percent of respondents want Putin to leave office at the end of his term in 2024 (an 11 percent increase over last year). With the number of respondents wanting Putin to remain continuing to hover just above 50 percent, Levada has suggested that the most noteworthy trend is the decrease in "undecided" respondents as anti-Putin sentiment solidifies. (*The Moscow Times*, July 30, 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.]

A DEEPENING RUSSO-IRANIAN PARTNERSHIP

In a historic first, Russia and Iran have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to increase military cooperation between the two countries. The MOU was signed during Iranian Navy Commander Hossein Khanzadi's visit to St. Petersburg in late July. While the document is not legally binding, regional experts assess that it represents a potent political symbol and could foreshadow a formal Iranian-Russian alliance meant to deter any U.S. military action against Tehran and increase both countries' ability to project power on land and sea in the region. The issuance of the MOU coincided with Russia's presentation at the UN of a plan for a Middle East security agreement modeled off the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. (*Al-Monitor*, July 30, 2019)