



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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September 27, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Middle East; Russia; Ukraine

NYONOKSA FALLOUT CONTINUES

Since the Russian government has yet to provide a definitive explanation for the nuclear accident that took place on August 8th, local residents are being forced to draw their own conclusions about the explosion, particularly as radioactive blast debris continues to wash ashore. So far, the debris includes two floating platforms equipped with ladders for divers and underwater storage containers - features that appear to support the theory that the accident resulted from a botched underwater operation to recover a nuclear-powered missile. In the absence of formal government guidance, local ecologist Andrei Klimov called a meeting with the residents of Nyonoksa on August 31st, letting them know that it was safe to eat food foraged from the forest but warning them that fishing and gathering anything from the ocean could be potentially dangerous. However, the meeting quickly deteriorated when angry attendees turned on Klimov, demanding an end to official lying and misinformation and venting their fury and fear about the dangers to which they have been exposed. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 3, 2019)

A DUBIOUS OFFER

Russian President Vladimir Putin has a novel suggestion on how to reconcile his country's development of advanced hypersonic weapons systems with international demands for new arms control negotiations to limit them: share those systems with the United States. Putin told reporters at a conference in Vladivostok that he had brought up the idea with President Trump at June's G20 Summit in Japan. "I told Donald 'if you want, we'll sell them to you and that's how we'll keep everything balanced right away,'" the Russian president said. Putin added that the U.S. has yet to respond to his offer or to other Russian proposals to prevent an arms race. (*Bloomberg*, September 5, 2019)

RUSSIAN MERCENARIES BOLSTER FINAL IDLIB ASSAULT

Russia's upcoming offensive on the last major rebel stronghold in Syria will be carried out by both official and unofficial boots on the ground. Inside sources have confirmed that hundreds of employees of the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary contractor owned by Presidential ally Yevgeny Prigozhin, will take part in the planned assault on Idlib, backed by tanks and Russian airpower. Wagner Group members have fought alongside Russian and Syrian troops previously, including in the liberation of Palmyra from the Islamic State terrorist group. If successful, the Russian operation in Idlib stands to definitively return a major part of the country to the control of Russia's ally, Bashar al-Assad, and could pave the way for a definitive end to the conflict and the beginning of reconstruction. (*The Moscow Times*, September 6, 2019)

KYIV AND MOSCOW SWAP PRISONERS

In a significant gesture of goodwill, Ukraine and Russia engaged in a prisoner swap in early September. Unlike previous exchanges, which involved combatants captured in the separatist regions of eastern Ukraine, the individuals freed on September 7th had little to do with the conflict itself; the Ukrainians handed over by Moscow, for example, included a filmmaker and the group of sailors captured by the Russian Navy in a now-infamous stand-off near the Kerch Strait last year.

The swap fulfilled a major campaign promise for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelinsky, who called it "the first step to end the war." Other analysts speculated that the move represented Vladimir Putin's attempts to achieve "a new stage in [his] big gamble with the West" and maneuver out from under the current sanctions regime. While the Dutch government criticized the release of a Russian man believed to have been part of the 2014 shootdown of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, most world leaders reacted positively to the prisoner swap and encouraged both Russia and Ukraine to take additional steps toward reviving peace talks. (*New York Times*, September 7, 2019)

A DEADLY PROTEST OVER ENDANGERED LANGUAGES

On September 10th, a man set himself on fire in protest of a controversial new language bill working its way through the Russian Parliament. The 79-year-old Albert Razin, who died as a result of his injuries, was a member of the Udmurt ethnic community. Only 560,000 Udmurts remain in Russia today, and the number of those fluent in their native language is rapidly declining. The draft legislation that moved Razin to carry out his deadly protest is designed to remove all existing requirements to teach indigenous languages in the regions and republics where non-ethnic Russian groups predominate. President Vladimir Putin effectively greenlit the legislation in 2017, when he said that the Russian children in these ethnic regions should not have to study in a language not their own. Now, Udmurt and other such languages have been effectively "downgraded... in all spheres of public life to the extent many are now ignored and must fight to survive." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 10, 2019)