



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Resource Security; Caucasus; Russia

THE KREMLIN'S LATEST ANTI-NAVALNY MOVES

On the heels of last month's controversial elections, the Russian government is embracing harsher tactics against its most outspoken opponent, Alexei Navalny. In early October, the Kremlin formally designated Navalny's Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) as a "foreign agent," subjecting it to more rigorous future oversight and the implied stigma of spying for a foreign government. FBK's director protested that the organization does not receive foreign funding, and that the designation is merely "another attempt to suffocate" Navalny and his allies.

Less than a week later, the authorities doubled down on the pressure by staging 30 simultaneous raids at the offices and homes of FBK employees, ostensibly as part of an ongoing money laundering investigation clearly designed as revenge against the Kremlin's most vocal critic. The raids were the second such large-scale operation carried out against FBK since the September elections. Alluding to the era of Stalinist repression, Navalny called it "probably the biggest coordinated searches in the country since 1938" and hypothesized that they were reprisals for the opposition's successful efforts in getting out the anti-Kremlin vote in Moscow. (*Al-Jazeera*, October 9, 2019; *Guardian*, October 15, 2019)

THE SHAMAN WHO SPARKED DISSENT

The arrest of a shaman who vowed to exorcise Russian President Vladimir Putin from office has exposed a deep vein of discontent in one of Russia's normally subdued Siberian regions. Aleksandr Gabyshev, a Sakha mystic from Yakutsk who proclaims that Putin "embodies the powers of evil," began a long journey on foot towards the nation's capital, promising to perform an exorcism ritual in Red Square and predicting that if he was stopped by the authorities, millions of his countrymen would rise up in protest. By the time he reached the Buryatian city of Ulan-Ude, Gabyshev had traveled 1,600 miles and had attracted a burgeoning social media following. However, he was arrested by a SWAT team and flown back to Yakutsk, where he now faces involuntary commitment to a mental institution – a sentence reminiscent of those handed down to many Soviet dissenters.

Gabyshev's treatment, in turn, appears to have catalyzed undercurrents of frustration in Buryatia, where residents are fed up with rigged politics and dismal economic prospects. A protest sparked by the detention of a Gabyshev supporter there morphed into a thousand-person gathering and a violent confrontation with riot police. One Ulan-Ude resident commented that "no matter what happened in Moscow or other cities, everything in our city was always quiet... [but] people have crossed a threshold." (*New York Times*, October 9, 2019)

TERROR FINANCING IN THE CAUCASUS

In early October, Russian authorities busted a terrorist financing cell in Kabardino-Balkaria that had sent thousands of dollars abroad to the Islamic State terrorist group. The leaders of the cell, a brother-sister duo, had raised over 6 million rubles (\$92,000) since 2015 and attracted more than 100 members to their group, hiding in plain sight by disguising themselves as a charity organization. The operation is indicative of the Russian government's ongoing efforts to crack down on support for foreign terrorist organizations; this year alone, the Federal Security Service has discovered ISIS-affiliated cells in 17 separate regions of the Russian Federation. (*The Moscow Times*, October 9, 2019)

RUSSIA'S ARCTIC PROJECT IS IN TROUBLE

Russia's vision for Arctic investment may be held hostage by new demands from the very foreign investors who might have made it possible. Russian journal *Vedomosti* broke the news that the group of Indian investors planning to purchase a 15-20% stake in Vostok Oil – a massive development project that encompasses five major oil fields in northern Siberia – is only willing to proceed if state oil firm ROSNEFT persuades the Russian government to grant the project a series of tax breaks worth roughly \$41 billion over the next three decades. Reportedly, ROSNEFT CEO Igor Sechin has been lobbying hard for the tax breaks since early summer, but the Russian Finance Ministry remains opposed to any new special exemptions for the project. (*The Moscow Times*, October 10, 2019)