



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2349

November 25, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Russia

GUTTING THE HRC

A rash of firings of Russia's top human rights advisors signify dark times ahead for civil liberties in the country, writes columnist Andrei Pertsev for . Pertsev details that the dismissal of four members from the presidential Human Rights Council (HRC) – including HRC head Mikhail Fedotov - categorically establishes the Kremlin's new intolerance for any real challenge to its authority.

Was the HRC a threat to the Kremlin? Not really, according to Pertsev. The Council "is first a presidential council, and only then a human rights council." Even so, the HRC has not always been "entirely obedient or voiceless," and the dismissed council members deviated from the official line by expressing support for electoral freedoms during Moscow's contentious September elections. This rendered their voices too dangerous to be tolerated in an official capacity. Predictably, Pertsev points out, their replacements are all staunch Kremlin loyalists who "slot nicely into the power vertical." And with a more obedient membership firmly ensconced at the HRC, "all of these uncomfortable topics will be avoided." (*The Moscow Times*, October 23, 2019)

ROSNEFT DROPS THE DOLLAR

Russia's main oil producer has announced that it will no longer use the dollar in its export contracts, and will switch over to the Euro as its default foreign currency. ROSNEFT head Igor Sechin announced the policy change on October 24th, citing the need to insulate the company from the pain inflicted by U.S. sanctions and his intention to take a stand against the "financial monopoly" of the dollar and the instability generated by the U.S. role in current trade wars. ROSNEFT's decision appears to be part of Russia's larger "de-dollarization" campaign, as other state-owned giants have also moved to conduct their business in non-dollar currencies and the country's central bank is in the process of divesting itself of its dollar reserves. (*Financial Times*, October 24, 2019)

WHELAN DETENTION EXTENDED

The saga of imprisoned American Paul Whelan continues, with a new order from a Russian judge extending his pre-trial detention for a fourth time. Per the judge's ruling, Whelan, who was originally detained last year in Moscow on charges of espionage, must now remain behind bars until at least December 29th. He maintains that the case against him is built on trumped-up charges and that he is essentially a political hostage. In response to the judge's order, Whelan's family criticized the case's lack of transparency and the continued denial of medical treatment to Whelan by prison authorities. Simultaneously, U.S. Embassy Spokesperson Rebecca Ross took to Twitter to comment: "300 days in Lefortovo. Without unrestricted legal assistance. Without unrestricted consular access. Without phone calls with family. Without evidence. This is not an open or fair process. Enough is enough." (*CNN*, October 24, 2019)

A WAVE OF CYBER RETALIATION

The Russian athletic doping scandal is once again back in the spotlight, with new reports of major cyber attacks on national and international sports organizations likely sponsored by the Russian government. Microsoft confirmed that it uncovered attacks against 16 different organizations beginning on September 16th – just prior to WADA's decision to open new proceedings against a number of Russian athletes suspected of cheating on their drug tests. The company attributed the attacks to Fancy Bear, a group of hackers likely affiliated with the GRU, Russia's military intelligence agency. Fancy Bear is known to have conducted other offensive cyber operations in the past against major international sports organizations, including WADA and the International Olympic Committee, stealing confidential personal data and disrupting internal operations in retaliation for scrutiny of Russian actions and policies. Microsoft maintained that most of the attacks were unsuccessful and that it is currently working with the targeted organizations to improve their defenses against state-sponsored aggression. (*Ars Technica*, October 29, 2019)

RUSSIA'S WAR ON JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

Human Rights Watch has reported a new spate of government persecution against Russia's small community of Jehovah's Witnesses, who are targeted "simply for practicing their faith." According to HRW officials, 15 police officers conducted a late October raid on a prayer group in Norilsk, confiscating electronics and bibles while rounding up worshippers for extensive interrogation. Such raids are enabled by an April 2017 decision by the Russian Supreme Court to designate the Jehovah's Witness Administrative Center in Moscow as an extremist organization, which resulted in a country-wide crackdown on the group's activities and the investigation, detention, or torture of nearly 300 of its members.

On the heels of the Norilsk raid, a Tomsk court handed down judgment against the head of another regional group of Jehovah's Witnesses, whose religious leadership has been excoriated by the Russian press as heading up "the cell of an extremist organization." Sergei Klimov, who was originally arrested in June 2018, was sentenced on November 5th to six years in jail. Klimov is the eighth member of the organization to receive jail time since the April 2017 Supreme Court decision, despite the Russian authorities' insistence that the ban is only against the organization's "legal entities," rather than its members. A spokesman for the group commented that Klimov's sentencing demonstrates how the Supreme Court ruling has in fact been transformed into "a weapon to target individual believers." (Human Rights Watch, October 29, 2019; *NPR*, November 5, 2019)