



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2351

December 5, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; NATO; Corruption; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

### RUSSIAN FINGERPRINTS ON ELECTIONS IN MADAGASCAR...

Russia's information warfare strategy has manifested itself once again in Madagascar, where Moscow's attempts to influence local elections for its own gain appear to be some of its most blatant to date. A newly published joint investigation by the *New York Times* and the London-based Dossier Center (run by Kremlin opponent and exile Mikhail Khodorkovsky) details the Kremlin's year-long effort to swing the tiny African island nation's presidential elections in Russia's favor, first by supporting former incumbent Hery Rajaonarimampianina and then by throwing its weight behind his challenger when it was clear that Rajaonarimampianina could not win. At the heart of the campaign, the investigation claims, was a need to ensure that Vladimir Putin's close ally, Yevgeny Prigozhin, maintained control over a recently acquired chromium mine – a profit-driven motive that fit well within Russia's new push across the African continent.

According to the investigation, Russia spied its opening when Rajaonarimampianina traveled to Moscow in 2018 for a private meeting with Putin and Prigozhin. A confidential letter he signed afterward contains an explicit request for Russian help in "resist[ing] attempts by international institutions to interfere" in the country's elections. Subsequently, more than thirty Russian operatives traveled to Antananarivo and set up shop, with teams dedicated to media tactics, legal affairs, and "counterpropaganda," even propping up a local cult pastor as a spoiler candidate. But the crude tactics, combined with little in-depth knowledge of the country or ability to speak the language, doomed Moscow's original plans to re-elect Rajaonarimampianina; amid widespread recognition of - and protest against - Russian involvement, the operatives shifted their support to Andry Rajoelina, a former mayor and transitional president. Rajoelina ultimately won the election – after promising Prigozhin continued control over the lucrative chromium mine in his country. (*New York Times*, November 11, 2019)

### ...AND IN CATALONIA

Meanwhile, the Spanish government is also formally investigating Russian interference in its recent referendum on Catalan independence. Residents of the long-restless autonomous community took to the polls in October to vote on whether Catalonia should separate from Spain, and the results overwhelmingly favored independence (although turnout was less than 50 percent). However, Spanish officials insist they have strong evidence that Russian operatives helped swing the vote, mobilizing on social media platforms to wage information warfare and destabilize the Spanish government. Catalan politicians are strongly denying any outside influence in their victory, and Moscow has denied any involvement in the face of the Spanish government's allegations. (Reuters, November 13, 2019)

### ICJ CASE MOVES FORWARD

A new ruling from the International Court of Justice heralds progress in the Government of Ukraine's pursuit of legal action against Russia for its provocations in eastern Ukraine and Crimea. In a decisive turning point on November 8th, the UN's highest court affirmed its jurisdiction over the complaints brought by Kyiv that Russia violated international treaties on terrorism financing and racial discrimination through its oppression of ethnic minorities on the annexed Crimean Peninsula and its efforts to supply weapons, funds, and trainings to Ukrainian separatists. Russia's lawyers had long insisted that the ICJ did not have jurisdiction in the case and that the complaints should thus be considered inadmissible. While the case will likely take months to settle, Ukrainian officials are celebrating the latest ruling as "a victory for the rule of law" that will force Russia to be held accountable for its aggression. (*Washington Post*, November 8, 2019)

### A HARSH CRITIQUE OF NATO

A controversial interview given by French President Emmanuel Macron about the state of the NATO alliance has provoked stunned reactions from world leaders – and some unsuppressed glee from Russian officials. In the interview, which appeared in a November edition of *The Economist*, Macron asserted that the world is currently witnessing "the brain death of NATO." He questioned the viability of the Alliance's Article V collective defense commitments and called for increased dialogue between the European Union and Russia. While many of Macron's counterparts criticized the interview as an overreaction to NATO's current difficulties, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Maria Zakharova took to Facebook to celebrate Macron's comments as "golden words... an exact definition of the current state of NATO." (*The Moscow Times*, November 8, 2019)

## **SOLIDARITY AT THE BRICS SUMMIT**

Russian President Vladimir Putin joined his BRICS counterparts at the bloc's annual summit, held this year in Brasilia, where he found common cause in creating a message implicitly critical of U.S. policies and influence. At the conclusion of the summit, the group's leaders issued a joint statement cautioning against an arms race in outer space, reiterating their commitment to the Paris Climate Accords, and decrying a recent rise in trade tensions and protectionism in the global economy. Putin also used the summit to carve out a new channel for his strategy of "de-dollarization" – fiscal policies that the Russian government is pursuing to reduce exposure to the greenback –by advocating that the BRICS' New Development Bank issue more loans in rubles instead of dollars. (*New York Times*, November 14, 2019)