



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

SURPRISE LEGAL VICTORY FOR RUSSIAN BLOGGER

A Moscow court's verdict in a high-profile free speech case is being hailed as a sign of the Kremlin's sensitivity to public pressure. Yegor Zhukov, a 21-year old student at Moscow's Higher School of Economics and a YouTube star who built a following by promoting various protest movements and criticizing Vladimir Putin's policies, was originally apprehended in July for participating in a peaceful protest. After his arrest, Zhukov was hit with additional charges of inciting extremism online - a crime that carries a hefty prison sentence. However, on December 6th, a judge instead handed down only a three-year suspended sentence, entailing minor restrictions on Zhukov's Internet use.

The blogger's supporters, as well as Zhukov himself, attributed the lenient verdict to an outpouring of public pressure on his behalf. These included daily pickets staged outside the police station, rallies attended by influential cultural figures decrying politically motivated imprisonments, and an open letter signed by hundreds calling for his release. Indeed, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov remarked after Zhukov's sentencing that "we saw various discussions about this... we don't turn a blind eye to anything. We carefully follow everything." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 6, 2019)

PUTIN AND ZELENSKY MEETING LABELED A DRAW

On December 9th, Russian President Vladimir Putin sat down for the first time in person with his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelensky, in pursuit of a solution to the ongoing conflict between their two countries. The meeting took place in Paris during a summit of the so-called Normandy Format, which also includes Germany and France. Putin arrived in Paris demanding a settlement that would return control to Kyiv of the currently disputed regions in exchange for constitutional changes to empower Ukraine's regional governments as well as a commitment from Ukraine's government to refrain from seeking membership in the EU and NATO. Zelensky refused to cave to Putin's pressure on these points, asserting that Kyiv would not discuss Moscow's more political demands until all security issues have been resolved. He also resolutely dismissed the Russian insistence that Ukraine abandon its unitary status to become a federated state. Ultimately, although little progress was made, both leaders remained positive in their post-summit comments to the press, and French President Emmanuel Macron lauded the meeting – the Format's first in three years – as a relaunch of the peace process. The leaders are set to meet again in four months. (*New York Times*, December 9, 2019)

DISASTER ON RUSSIA'S LONE AIRCRAFT CARRIER

On December 12th, a major fire broke out on board the *Admiral Kuznetsov*, Russia's sole aircraft carrier, killing one, injuring ten, and leaving an additional two sailors missing. The tragic fire took place during routine repair work on the carrier while it was in port at Murmansk. The *Kuznetsov* had previously been deployed in the Mediterranean, supporting Russian airstrikes in Syria, but was forced to return home for maintenance over a year ago and has been plagued by accidents ever since. Nevertheless, Russian officials claimed that the fire would not delay the scheduled repairs, which are due to be completed in 2021. (*CNN*, December 12, 2019)

RUSSIA-GERMANY DISPUTE ESCALATES

The unsolved murder of a Chechen exile in Berlin this fall continues to drive a wedge between Moscow and Berlin, with both countries expelling a number of the other's diplomats in early December. With evidence rapidly accumulating to confirm allegations that either the Russian government or that of the Russian republic of Chechnya directed the killing of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili – a former rebel commander in the second Chechen war residing in Berlin who was shot in broad daylight in a public park – the German government ordered two Russian diplomats to leave the country in the beginning of the month. In retaliation, Russia ordered the expulsion of two German diplomats on December 12th, justifying the decision as "unavoidable" in the face of Berlin's "absolutely unfounded" accusations about the Kremlin's role in Khangoshvili's death. (*BBC*, December 12, 2019)

A NEW RECORD IN POPULATION DECLINE

The latest demographic data released by Russia's official statistics agency has set an ominous 11-year record for the country's ongoing population decline. In giving context to the record-setting number, RBC News pointed out that from January through October 2019, deaths in Russia outnumbered live births by 259,600, and that low expected volumes of migrants through the end of the year will not be sufficient to compensate for the shortfall. While Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov acknowledged the dismal figures and called the situation "certainly very unpleasant," he maintained that the demographic crisis is "at its apex." The Russian government has asserted in the past that, in part due to new programs designed to encourage population growth, it expects natural growth rates to resume within the next five years. (*The Moscow Times*, December 13, 2019)