



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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January 7, 2020 **Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Africa; Europe

CRACKDOWN ON JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES CONTINUES

A western Russian court has handed down a vindictive sentence to another follower of the Jehovah's Witnesses, marking the latest in a series of politically-driven convictions of members of the tiny religious group. On December 13th, Vladimir Alushkin was convicted on charges of extremist activity for his role in running one of Russia's few remaining branches of Jehovah's Witnesses and now faces a six-year prison sentence. Members have faced legal persecution in Russia ever since a 2017 law labeled the group an extremist organization and banned it from practicing its tenets. Jarrod Lopes, a New York-based spokesman for the organization, called Alushkin's sentence "one of the harshest imposed" since the ban and derided the state of religious freedom in Russia as "reminiscent of Soviet times." (Reuters, December 13, 2019)

STUDYING ABROAD: THE NEWEST "UNDESIRABLE" ACTIVITY?

A proposal circulating in the Russian parliament suggests a new level of official paranoia about foreign influence on Russian students. The Duma's special commission on foreign meddling – set up in the wake of this summer's mass protests in Moscow, which the Kremlin maintains were instigated by foreign governments – has advised that students who take "undesirable" courses while abroad might face some kind of penalty on their return home. Vasily Piskaryov, the commission's chair, asserted that "the most common form [of foreign interference] is training future 'specialists' abroad" who can then go on to conduct activities that the Kremlin considers "undesirable" – such as grooming their own candidates for Russian elections. Piskaryov pointed to the Czech Republic, Finland, and the Baltic states as the most likely hubs for these trainings. (*The Moscow Times*, December 13, 2019)

ANOTHER INCENTIVE FOR AFRICA?

Moscow appears to be eyeing another lever of potential influence in its burgeoning African relationships. Russian Deputy Finance Minister Alexei Moiseev announced in a December interview that the ban currently preventing the Central African Republic (CAR) from exporting diamonds should be lifted, allowing the country to engage in full export of the gemstones for the first time since 2013.

Moiseev's suggestion to create a roadmap for the legalization of CAR diamonds comes as Russia prepares to assume the rotating chair of the Kimberley Process – the international regulatory initiative that oversees the diamond trade – while simultaneously strengthening military and commercial relationships with the CAR. However, the European Union is likely to oppose any lifting of the ban, and – while declining to comment directly on the diamond road map proposal – a U.S. State Department spokesperson described Russia's relationship with the African nation as seeking to "exploit the country's fragile institutions and weak rule of law rather than supporting good governance, transparency, and sound economic growth." (*Bloomberg*, December 15, 2019)

US/EU IMAGE IMPROVES AMONG RUSSIANS

The latest results from independent pollster Levada Center show that the attitude of the average Russian toward the West may be improving. Of the 1,616 individuals polled at the end of November, 47 percent of respondents indicated that they had a positive view of the United States, while 52 percent had a positive view of the European Union. These results show a marked uptick over May 2018, when positive views of the U.S. and EU were expressed by only 20 percent and 28 percent of respondents, respectively. (*The Moscow Times*, December 17, 2019)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Given the effect of Russia's increasingly authoritarian political climate on pollsters and respondents alike, the results of public opinion surveys in Russia should be viewed with some caution.]

A SHOOTING AT THE LUBYANKA

On December 19th, a lone gunman staged an attack outside Russia's primary intelligence agency, killing two and wounding at least five. Police cordoned off the area near Moscow's Lubyanka Square, the main headquarters of the Federal Security Service (FSB), and FSB representatives confirmed that the attacker was quickly "neutralized." The shooting took place on a day dedicated to honoring security service workers, and at the time of the attack, Russian president Vladimir Putin was nearby giving an opening speech at a gala for the occasion. While few details have surfaced about the nature of the attack or the perpetrator's identity, the Ministry of Health reported that three of the victims were FSB officers, and the Investigative Committee confirmed that a criminal inquiry into the attack is now underway. (*CNN*, December 19, 2019)