



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Corruption; Europe; Russia

SENATE LEVELS NEW RUSSIA SANCTIONS

In a bipartisan vote, the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee passed a new bill intended to punish Russia for its aggressive actions abroad in mid-December. The *Defending American Security from Kremlin Aggression (DASKA) Act* would level a host of punishing measures against the most powerful individuals and organizations in Russia's cyber and oil industries while also banning transactions with Russia's largest banks, citing their alleged role in "undermin[ing] democratic institutions in other countries." Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), one of the bill's sponsors, described DASKA as "the sanctions bill from hell," designed as a specific reprimand for Moscow's electoral interference in foreign democracies, its role in the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine, and its lethal targeting of exiled dissidents. The bill is not without its critics, however. SFRC Chairman Jim Risch (R-ID) voted against the bill, arguing that its broad language precludes any real consequences for its Russian targets while risking backlash from European partners and allies who may get caught in the fallout. Other analysts have added that Russia is less vulnerable to new sanctions than the bill's authors argue, thanks to the Kremlin's recent pursuit of a financial strategy that minimizes the country's sovereign debt while building foreign exchange and gold reserves. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 19, 2019)

NAVALNY STAFFER KIDNAPPED

An Anti-Corruption Foundation (FBK) staffer was rounded up as part of what appears to be a "year-end crackdown" by authorities on Russia's most prominent opposition group. Ruslan Shaveddinov was at home in his Moscow apartment when Federal Security Service agents broke in, arrested him on charges of evading mandatory military service, and transported him to a prison on the remote Arctic island of Novaya Zemlya. Shaveddinov's lawyers have filed a lawsuit alleging abuse of power, kidnapping, and illegal confinement, and they purport to have medical records showing that he was exempt from the conscription that forms the basis of the authorities' case against him. FBK leader Alexey Navalny took to social media to spread the news of Shaveddinov's kidnapping, asserting that his imprisonment is politically motivated and pointing out that it coincided with another raid by the authorities on his organization's Moscow headquarters. (*CNN*, December 26, 2019)

RUNET'S FIRST SUCCESS?

The Russian government's plan to create a separate Internet for its country appears to be one step closer to reality. On December 26th, the Ministry of Communication announced that it had conducted its first successful test of the new country-wide network, claiming that no Russian internet users reported any trouble or noticed any difference in their ability to get online during the time of the test. If the Ministry's claims are accurate, the test represents another step forward for "RuNet," a parallel but isolated Russian domain system that was authorized by President Vladimir Putin earlier this year and formally enacted in November. All earlier tests of the system had failed, prompting many observers to question the project's feasibility while still fearing the implications that a separate Russian internet would only imbue the Kremlin with increased censorship and monitoring abilities. (*Engadget*, December 26, 2019)

WELCOME TO THE RUSSO-BRITISH MEDIA WAR

Dark times are on the horizon for British journalists in Russia, says one senior official in Moscow. The anonymous government source told Russian news agencies TASS and RIA that the Kremlin is planning an "in-kind" response to recent actions taken by the British authorities against Russian reporters, including the denial of a visa to one journalist and the expulsion of another from London. The incident is the latest in a months-long media spat, which started when British authorities took punitive action against Russian media in the UK for biased coverage of the Skripal poisonings that violated the country's impartial reporting rules. Russian regulators and legislators retaliated with a series of fines, threats, and restrictions on British broadcasters, contributing to the deteriorating dynamic relationship between both governments. (*The Moscow Times*, December 26, 2019)

DISCONTENT IN THE ORTHODOX RANKS

The final months of 2019 brought increased political activity from Russian Orthodox believers and even from lower-level clergy members disgruntled with the Kremlin's suppression of public protest. Many practicing Orthodox Christians took part in last summer's pro-democracy protests, citing their religious beliefs as the factor that brought them out onto the streets. Subsequently, more than 200 priests signed a letter condemning the unfair legal treatment handed down to arrested demonstrators, calling out the authorities by appealing to their faith: "many of you were baptized in the Orthodox Church and consider yourselves believers. Judicial proceedings should not be repressive, courts should not be used as a means of suppressing dissent, and the use of force should not be carried out with unjustified cruelty."

Since then, other priests have attended trials in a show of support for the detainees, a nearly unprecedented form of political activism that contrasts starkly with the Church's attitude toward Vladimir Putin's administration in 2012, when Patriarch Kirill called Putin's re-election "a miracle from God." Nevertheless, the highest levels of the church's bureaucracy have remained loyal to the Kremlin, issuing a formal rebuke to the priests for their political activities. (UNIAN, December 27, 2019)