



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Latin America; Russia; Turkey; Ukraine

POMPEO ACCENTUATES THE POSITIVE IN MINSK

In the midst of an energy crisis that strikes at the heart of state sovereignty in Eastern Europe, the Trump administration is making a bid to woo Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko out of the Russian orbit. The crisis began when Lukashenko, weary of the Kremlin's efforts to integrate Belarus into the Russian Federation by economic and political means, refused to renew an existing energy agreement with Russia, which supplied 80% of Belarus' oil last year. When the agreement expired on New Year's Day, oil shipments to Belarus were halted until January 4th, 2020, when flow resumed but at a fraction of its usual output. In the month that followed, Lukashenko entered negotiations with Norway and Kazakhstan for alternate supplies of the commodity.

When he arrived in Minsk on February 1st, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo stressed American energy output and offered competitive pricing to Lukashenko as an alternative to Russian oil. Additionally, he emphasized the improving bilateral relations between Minsk and Washington, with the U.S. planning to name its first ambassador to Belarus since a 2008 spat over human rights abuses froze diplomatic relations between the two countries. (Associated Press, February 1, 2020; Reuters, February 4, 2020)

RUSSIAN AVIATION COMPANY WANTS ITS FRENCH LOANS BACK

Russian airplane component company Aviazapchast has filed paperwork in a Moscow court to reclaim an \$11.8 million loan made to Marine Le Pen's Front National Party. The cash was loaned during the runup to the 2017 French presidential and parliamentary elections, which saw the far-right Le Pen face off against progressive candidate Emmanuel Macron. The loan was made through the First Czech-Russian Bank in Moscow at a time when European banks were not lending money to the far-right French party. The rights to the loan have bounced around in the years since. The Russian bank lost its license in 2016, which led to the loan being transferred to Konti, a car rental agency with a registration address on the outskirts of Moscow. Sometime after that, the rights went to current holders Aviazapchast, who according to the German Marshall Fund are "...involved in high-priority strategic partnerships for the Russian state, including exports to the Syrian Ministry of Defense." Little else is known about Aviazapchast and why the loan rights passed to it years after the fact. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 4, 2020)

ERDOGAN BACKS TATARS IN KYIV

On February 3rd, 2020, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan paid an official visit to Kyiv, where he met with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky. During the subsequent press conference, the Turkish president reiterated his support for the Crimean-Tatar minority group, many of whom have lived under Russian occupation since the Kremlin's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014. In a show of solidarity, Erdogan pledged to build five hundred homes for internally displaced Crimean-Tatar families who fled to other parts of Ukraine. Erdogan has gone on record in opposition to Russia's annexation, calling it "illegitimate." The Kyiv meeting additionally produced a \$36 million agreement for Turkish military and other aid, as well as the start of talks on possible free-trade and natural gas transit agreements between Ukraine and Turkey. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 3, 2020)

LAVROV MIRRORS POMPEO'S MOVES... BUT IN LATIN AMERICA

In a show of diplomatic tit for tat, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov embarked on a multi-state tour of Latin America only days after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo concluded his own four nation tour of countries of the former Soviet Union. Lavrov made stops in Cuba and Mexico before meeting with besieged Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, who has seen economic strife erode his legitimacy. One of Maduro's few remaining strategic partners, Russia sent Lavrov to Caracas to discuss cooperation in defense, energy, and other spheres that counteracts "illegal unilateral sanctions" by the United States and other countries. (Reuters, February 4, 2020)

ANOTHER KADYROV CRITIC KILLED

Imran Aliyev, a Chechen blogger known online by the alias "Old Monsur," was found dead in his French hotel room on January 30th. Aliyev had been a harsh critic of the rule of Chechen strongman Ramzan Kadyrov, who is a close ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. His body was found with multiple stab wounds in the French city of Lille, where he had arrived from Belgium, his place of residence, the previous day.

Aliyev's murder follows a recent bloody pattern in Europe. In August of 2019, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a former separatist militant during the Chechen Wars, was gunned down in Berlin. German authorities apprehended a Russian suspect in connection to the killing. Kadyrov and the Kremlin both have denied any involvement in the plot, but the German government nonetheless expelled two Russian diplomats during the ensuing diplomatic spat. The investigation into the Aliyev killing is still ongoing. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 4, 2020)