



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; SPACE; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

TOWARD DIPLOMATIC NORMALIZATION WITH UKRAINE

Will Russia soon have new representation in Kyiv? Recent comments by Kremlin Press Secretary Dmitri Peskov and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov suggest that Moscow may be close to appointing a new Ambassador to Ukraine, filling a post that has been vacant for the past six years. The two countries had recalled their envoys from one another's capitals after the 2014 Maidan Revolution ousted pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich from power.

The arrangement, Peskov was quick to stress, was still notional, and suitable candidates had not yet been discussed by the respective governments. However, the news tracks with a recent thaw in relations between Moscow and Kyiv that has taken place since the election of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The previous Ukrainian government, led by Petro Poroshenko, had allowed the nearly twenty-year-old "Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation, and Partnership" between the two countries to expire in 2018. (UNIAN, February 11, 2020)

THE POLITICS OF NAMESAKES

In late February, the neighborhood around the Russian embassy in Prague will be getting new signage, pursuant to a recent decision by city authorities in the Czech capital. In commemoration of the five-year anniversary of his killing, the square directly across from the embassy is being renamed in honor of Boris Nemtsov, the slain Russian opposition candidate and former Deputy Prime Minister who was gunned down mere yards from the Kremlin on a Moscow bridge in 2015. Additionally, space in the city's nearby Stromovka Park will soon bear the name of Anna Politovskaya, the famed Russian journalist who was shot outside her Moscow home in 2006.

The move, though championed by individuals like Prague mayor Zdenek Hrib, is controversial. Some Czechs fear Russia's reaction to the decision, which has been described by Green Party member Petr Kutilek as "troll diplomacy." This is not the first time Prague namesakes have caused a stir, however. In the fall of 2019, vandals defaced the monument to Marshal Ivan Konev, the Soviet officer who liberated Prague at the end of World War II, prompting the city government to cover it in scaffolding and tarp to deter further incidents. (London *Guardian*, February 11, 2020)

STELLAR STALKERS

A pair of Russian satellites launched in November of 2019 are stalking an American spy satellite in its orbit around the earth. The pair, which began their journey into space as a single craft before separating, is said to be a set of "inspector satellites" observing the American craft from a distance of 100 miles. First noticed by Michael Thompson, a graduate student at Purdue University, the development has military personnel and policymakers in Washington worried, prompting the opening of a dialogue with Moscow on the matter via official diplomatic channels. (space.com, February 11, 2020)

AGENCY REQUESTS BAN OF FOREIGN IT

In a move that is being billed as a step intended to better protect critical infrastructure, the Russian Federal Service for Technical and Export Control has requested that the Kremlin ban the use of foreign information and protection technologies throughout the country. The proposed measure would be sweeping, affecting industries ranging from transport to finance to defense to mining. It is said to be connected to recent moves by the Russian government to build its own independent internet by directing web traffic through servers under the control of the Russian state. (*The Moscow Times*, February 11, 2020)

RUSSIAN MH17 SKEPTICISM GROWS

A new poll jointly conducted by Russia's Levada Center and the Dutch University of Leiden has found that public sentiments about the downing of flight MH17 are changing in Russia. The airliner, traveling from the Netherlands to Malaysia, was shot over rebel-held territory in Eastern Ukraine in 2015, killing all 298 people onboard, a majority of whom were Dutch. The poll shows that 10 percent of those polled now believe Russia was responsible for the catastrophe, up from just two percent in previous surveys. It also finds that a majority of respondents believe Russia should pay compensation to the families of the victims of the disaster.

In the years since the tragedy, three Russians and one Ukrainian have been charged with carrying out the act by Dutch authorities, and their trial is set to begin in March in the Netherlands. However, Russia does not extradite its own nationals to foreign jurisdictions, so it is highly likely that the defendants will be tried *in absentia*. (*The Moscow Times*, February 14, 2020)

[EDITORS' 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.]