



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; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Europe; Russia

RUSSIAN MILITARY INTEL ACTIVE IN IRELAND

Members of Russia's military intelligence service (known as the GRU) have been spotted arriving and operating in Ireland, according to Irish security officials. To date, the Russian agents have been observed monitoring activity at Dublin Port, as well as examining the network of fiber-optic cables that run under the Atlantic Ocean and connect North America and Europe. The cables transport phone, internet, and other data between the continents and are at particular risk of being tapped into or disrupted due to their demarcation on publicly available maps. Russian ships were spotted loitering near the location of a known undersea cable as recently as 2018. Additionally, experts believe the GRU agents are present in Dublin in order to spy on the offices of large tech companies such as Google and Facebook, although no evidence confirming this supposition has yet been uncovered. (*Business Insider*, February 17, 2020)

RUSSIA'S PARLIAMENT WANTS TO GRANT PUTIN IMMUNITY

In the wake of President Vladimir Putin's proposed constitutional reforms earlier this year, a Russian parliamentary working group has submitted a proposal to further change Russia's political trajectory during Putin's final term. In addition to altering the president's official title to "Supreme Leader" and other steps, the proposal would effectively give ex-Russian presidents immunity from prosecution for life after leaving office. This would be done by granting holders of the office lifetime appointments to the upper chamber of the Russian legislature, known as the Federation Council - thereby conferring on them the immunity that all Russian parliamentarians already enjoy.

This is hardly the first time that presidential immunity has played a role in the history of post-Soviet Russia. President Putin first assumed the presidency in 1999 after his predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, resigned the post. Shortly thereafter, Putin granted immunity to Yeltsin and members of his family in the midst of an ongoing investigation into possible corruption involving the ex-leader in what was widely seen as a political *quid pro quo*. The contemporary proposal, however, is being viewed by experts through another lens: as a vehicle to keep Putin in power after his currently-scheduled departure from office in 2024. (Reuters, February 18, 2020)

FINANCE MINISTRY TO BUY CONTROLLING STAKE IN SBERBANK

Russia's Central Bank has announced that it is selling a controlling share in Sberbank directly to the Russian Ministry of Finance. The change in management from one state organ to another is being billed as a way to streamline operations and eliminate conflicts of interest. In addition to issuing currency, the Russian Central Bank also conducts oversight of financial institutions, which before the sale meant regulating its own asset in Sberbank. Sberbank was the largest bank in the Soviet Union and kept this position in Russia after the fall of Communism. State funds from Russian natural resource sales will reportedly be used by the Ministry of Finance to purchase the shares. (*Financial Times*, February 11, 2020)

NOBODY WANTS RUSSIAN PASSENGER JETS

Russia's state-controlled Sukhoi Civil Aircraft Company has no new buyers for its Superjet 100 beyond the country's state-run Aeroflot airline. Intended as a competitor in the global passenger aircraft market, the Superjet 100 has been plagued by accidents and mechanical issues since its inception in 2011. Private Russian airlines don't utilize the model, while international companies such as Ireland's CityJet and Mexico's Interjet have phased out or are phasing the model out of their fleets. Recent production difficulties have even led to Sukhoi supplying Aeroflot, currently its only consistent partner, with a fraction of the jets contractually promised in 2018. Sukhoi's track record in Russia is known to be poor. An accident involving a Superjet 100 resulted in the death of 41 people in Moscow last year, while Russian domestic airline company IrAero is demanding compensation for lost revenue stemming from technical failures and defects. (*The Moscow Times*, February 19, 2020)

LONDON CLAIMS GRU BEHIND GEORGIAN CYBER ATTACK

British and American security officials are accusing the intelligence arm of the Russian military (GRU) of committing cyber-attacks against Georgia's internet and telecommunications infrastructure last year, crippling government websites and broadcast capabilities. Among the images used on sites during the cyberattack was that of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, proclaiming his return to the country nearly five years after fleeing from corruption charges he claims are politically motivated. The attack came in the wake of serious political unrest in Georgia; the summer of 2019 saw violent street clashes between demonstrators and police after an invited member of the Russian Duma addressed the Georgian Parliament on brotherly cooperation between the two countries.

Since the attempted poisoning of ex-spy Sergei Skripal on British soil in 2018, the UK has stepped up efforts to expose covert GRU activity around the world. In the British government's view, the organization's goal is the destabilization of countries of strategic interest to Russia. Ukraine has been a target of similar attacks in recent years. (*BBC News*, February 20, 2020)