



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Global Health; Europe; Russia; Ukraine

PRAGUE MAYOR NEEDS PROTECTION FROM MOSCOW

Zdenek Hrib, the mayor of Prague, has been given police protection after he and others were identified by the Czech newspaper *Respekt* as the potential targets of a Russian assassination plot. The story stems from the recent apprehension by Czech authorities of a suspected Russian intelligence officer traveling on a diplomatic passport and found to be carrying a suitcase containing the poison ricin. The suspected hit is said to be motivated by recent municipal decisions made in the Czech capital. Earlier this year, Hrib spearheaded the renaming of the square opposite the Russian Embassy for slain Russian dissident activist Boris Nemtsov. Additionally, the city also removed a statue of Ivan Konev, the Red Army Marshall who was instrumental in enforcing Soviet rule in Central and Eastern Europe after the end of World War II.

The report claims that agents of the Russian security services had entered the country with the intent of poisoning Hrib and other city officials. Russian actors are also suspected of being behind a string of cyber-attacks that crippled hospitals, ministries, and an airport in Prague on April 22nd. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 27, 2020)

THE FSB CONNECTION TO MH-17

Bellingcat, the private intelligence and investigation outfit known for its work identifying the perpetrators of the March 2018 poisoning of ex-spy Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, England, believe they have uncovered the identity of a high-ranking member of the Russian security services involved in the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight 17 (known as MH-17) over Ukrainian territory in July of 2014. The group believes that FSB Colonel General Andrei Burlaka is the true identity of a shadowy figure known as Vladimir Ivanovich, a weapons and resource coordinator mentioned by name and heard on intercepted calls from the territory of Donetsk in eastern Ukraine before and after the shootdown.

The calls indicate that Ivanovich was above the military chain of command of the Donetsk People's Republic, as the pro-Russian breakaway region is formally known. Given his role in the region's military logistics, Ivanovich's approval would have been required for the *Buk* missiles that took down MH-17 to cross the border from Russia in the first place. Ivanovich was identified as the FSB commander in question via hacked social media messages between staff members of the then-speaker of the regional parliament. (Bellingcat, April 28, 2020)

CORONAVIRUS THREATENS RUSSIA'S NUCLEAR CITIES

ROSATOM, Russia's state-run nuclear agency, is sounding the alarm over the spread of the coronavirus in some of its nuclear facilities, which are located in secret cities closed to foreigners and Russians without special clearance. Alexie Likhachev, the head of the organization, has assured workers living in obscure centers such as Sarov, Desnogorsk, and Elektrostal that vital medical supplies such as ventilators and masks are on their way in. The secret complexes are vital to Russia's nuclear energy and weapons' capability, but also shrouded in extreme secrecy and little is known about them - including their level of preparedness for the current pandemic. (London *Guardian*, April 28, 2020)

THE DONBASS HEADS BACK TO THE USSR

In parallel moves, the heads of the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in eastern Ukraine have announced the official usage of WWII-era names for their cities in order to commemorate upcoming public holidays in the two breakaway regions. Donetsk and Luhansk, which were once called Stalino and Voroshilovgrad, will now formally adopt the names for the upcoming Victory Day (May 9th), Day of Mourning for the Start of the Great Patriotic War (June 22nd), and the Day of Liberation for each city (September 8th and February 14th, respectively). The move is a part of a string of decrees designed to legitimize the separatists' hold on the occupied territories and to continue the rehabilitation of the image of Stalin in Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union. (*Euromaidan Press*, April 29, 2020)