



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2411

September 4, 2020 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman, Sydney Duckor**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Corruption

## **PUTIN CLAIMS U.S., UKRAINE LURED MERCENARIES TO BELARUS**

The arrest in Belarus of 33 Russian mercenaries belonging to the Wagner Group early last month, in the run up to that country's presidential election, was a result of a joint U.S.-Ukraine intelligence operation, Vladimir Putin has argued. The men, all of whom but one were deported back to Russia, were previously suspected by Belarusian authorities (including now-embattled President Alexander Lukashenko) of attempting to incite chaos and destabilize the August 9th vote on the Kremlin's behalf. Russia's president has a different take on the events, however; in comments on state television, Putin argued that U.S. and Ukrainian involvement in the affair was a "known fact." He did not provide any evidence for his claim, however. (*The Moscow Times*, August 27, 2020)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The episode is a noteworthy one, because Russian attitudes toward Belarus have shifted considerably in recent weeks. Relations between Moscow and Minsk had deteriorated over the past year on account of stepped-up Russian efforts to annex Belarus and lingering disputes over energy pricing. These tensions lent credence to the notion that the Kremlin might want to cause difficulties for Lukashenko in his bid for a sixth term in office. In the aftermath of the August 9th vote, however, Belarus has been rocked by major opposition protests, and Lukashenko has sought support from Russia as a way to stabilize his rule. For its part, Russia has appeared eager to help - including, it appears, by reframing the facts around its prior conduct.]

## **ANOTHER OPPOSITION BLOGGER BLOODIED**

A young blogger and radio personality known to authorities for his involvement in large-scale Moscow protests last August was assaulted outside his apartment this week by masked assailants. The blogger, Yegor Zhukov, found himself in legal trouble last year for posting videos critical of last year's local election proceedings, when Moscow authorities barred several opposition candidates from running. Zhukov was later arrested and received a suspended sentence for what authorities called "extremism." The attack left Zhukov's face bruised and bloodied, as catalogued in pictures of his injuries that he posted on social media. The day before, Zhukov went public on his recent dismissal from a graduate program at the Moscow Higher School of Economics. The blogger claims the administration's decision to dismiss him was conducted "on orders from above." (*Al-Jazeera*, August 31, 2020)

## **SUSTAINING WAGNER IN LIBYA**

The Kremlin is strengthening its surrogate military presence in North Africa. Between November 2019 and July 2020, some 338 "suspicious flights" between Syria and Libya were conducted by Russian military aircraft, a new independent monitoring report submitted to the United Nations has outlined. Russia currently lacks an official military presence in the country, and it is believed that the flights were conducted in order to supply mercenaries belonging to the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor that has been deeply involved in Libya over the past couple of years. An earlier report by the same watchdog group estimated that up to 1,200 Wagner mercenaries are now present in Libya in support of Khalifa Haftar, the Moscow-backed warlord who currently controls the eastern half of the country. (Reuters, September 2, 2020)

## **GERMANY: NAVALNY POISONED BY NOVICHOK**

Nearly two weeks after Alexei Navalny fell ill on a flight back from Siberia and slipped into a coma, his doctors are certain that the prominent Russian opposition activist was poisoned with a chemical agent called Novichok. The discovery was made in Germany, where Navalny was transferred days after purportedly ingesting the poison at the airport in Tomsk. According to Navalny's Russian doctors, the opposition leader was merely suffering from low blood sugar when he left the country. Extensive examination in Germany, however, has uncovered the real, and much more sinister, cause for his illness.

The revelation has international implications. Novichok, a Cold War-era chemical weapon developed by the Soviet government, was used two years ago by agents of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence service, in a botched assassination attempt on former spy Sergei Skripal in England. A Russian defector, Skripal had fed secrets to the British government for years. The Kremlin continues to deny its involvement in the Skripal incident, as well as in Navalny's poisoning. However, experts are confident that only Russian authorities have the resources and capability to weaponize Novichok - and that therefore both men were officially targeted for elimination. (*New York Times*, September 2, 2020)