



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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

SPACE AS A THEATER OF U.S.-RUSSIAN COMPETITION

On December 15th, Russia's military successfully tested a land-based anti-satellite missile capable of striking objects in low earth orbit and leaving a cloud of debris hazardous to other nearby assets. Earlier this year, the Russians also tested a space-based or "co-orbital" anti-satellite weapon, demonstrating the Kremlin's growing military capabilities above the Earth's surface. According to Gen. James Dickinson, the commander of U.S. Space Command, Russia's recent string of tests is occurring while "Russia publicly claims it is working to prevent the transformation of outer space into a battlefield." (space.com, December 16, 2020)

RUSSIA SPORTS BAN SHORTENED, BUT UPHELD

Following an official appeal, the World Anti-Doping Agency's (WADA) proposed four-year ban of Russian teams from international sporting competition was halved to just two years by the Court of Arbitration for Sport. However, the ruling still mandates the suspension of formal Russian teams from the next two Olympic Games and the upcoming 2022 FIFA World Cup. The ban also prevents Vladimir Putin and other Russian leaders from attending international sporting events in an official capacity. Individual Russian athletes cleared of doping may still participate in sporting events if their uniforms state the words "neutral athlete" or some equivalent, but the Russian flag and anthem will not be used in ceremonies. The decision comes after WADA found evidence of a large-scale state-sanctioned doping effort associated with the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, Russia. (Associated Press, December 17, 2020)

U.S. TO CLOSE TWO CONSULATES IN RUSSIA

The State Department is closing its final two consulates in Russia and confining its official diplomatic presence to the American Embassy in Moscow. The offices shutting their doors are located in Ekaterinburg in the Ural Region and Vladivostok on the Russian Pacific coast. The move follows years of brewing diplomatic tensions that have significantly shrunk America's formal presence in Russia. In 2017, the Russian government placed a cap on the number of U.S. diplomats allowed to operate in the country. The following year, authorities ordered the closure of the U.S. consulate in Saint Petersburg, Russia's second largest city. The majority of staff members employed by the consulates in Ekaterinburg and Vladivostok were Russian nationals. The closure will result in their dismissal and the transfer of remaining American diplomats to Moscow. (ABC News, December 18, 2020)

RUSSIAN NATIONAL GUARD TO SUPPRESS PROTESTS IN BELARUS

Months of talks between Russian and Belarusian officials have resulted in a cooperation agreement permitting Russian National Guard forces to help quell protests on the streets of Minsk and other cities. These cities have been rocked by demonstrations since August, when incumbent Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko claimed victory in a reelection campaign marred by allegations of ballot box stuffing and corruption. Officially, Russian forces will be working with the Belarusian Interior Ministry to protect public safety and combat extremism. Prior to the agreement, a reserve force of Russian officers had been deployed near the Belarusian border, but its mobilization would only be triggered when "the situation gets out of control." (*The Moscow Times*, December 18, 2020)

BOSNIANS GIFT LAVROV UKRAINIAN ORTHODOX ICON

International controversy erupted last week when Milorad Dodik, the Serbian member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's presidential troika, gave Sergei Lavrov a centuries-old Orthodox icon during the Russian Foreign Minister's recent trip to Bosnia. The icon is believed to have originated in Luhansk, a region in Eastern Ukraine that has been partially under the control of pro-Russian separatists since 2014. In response, the Ukrainian embassy in Sarajevo demanded a full explanation of how the icon made its way to Bosnia and why it was given as a gift. Days after the trip, Russian authorities announced that they would return the icon to Bosnia pending the results of an Interpol investigation into the artifact and how it left Ukraine. (*Al-Jazeera*, December 17, 2020; Associated Press, December 19, 2020)

THE TRUTH ABOUT NAVALNY'S POISONING COMES OUT

Days after publishing the identities of FSB agents who allegedly participated in his poisoning and subsequent coverup, opposition politician Alexei Navalny personally called members of the squad while posing as an FSB auditor writing a report on the operation. With Bellingcat staffers on hand, Navalny called Konstantin Kudryavtsev, a chemical weapons expert whose flight logs show two separate trips to Omsk in the aftermath of the incident. On the call, Kudryavtsev discloses several details about how the FSB team was able to expose Navalny to the Novichok nerve agent, as well as the cleanup efforts to hide the FSB's involvement. In the agent's retelling, the plot failed due to the pilot's decision to conduct an emergency landing, potentially saving Navalny's life. (*Bellingcat*, December 21, 2020)