



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2435

December 31, 2020 **Matt Maldonado, Ilan I. Berman**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Islamic Extremism; Corruption; Russia

PRESIDENTIAL IMMUNITY SIGNED INTO LAW

Former Russian presidents and their families will now benefit from lifetime immunity from investigation and prosecution, after the State Duma passed a bill expanding the protection. Previously, presidents were only granted immunity from prosecution connected to alleged crimes committed while in office. When the bill was first floated last month, it raised speculation that President Putin was planning to step down in the near future, despite claiming victory in a referendum vote earlier this year and clearing a path for himself to rule until 2036. The new law also grants former presidents a lifetime appointment to the Federation Council, Russia's upper chamber of parliament - a position that also confers lifetime immunity to its members. (*Guardian*, December 22, 2020)

[EDITORS' NOTE: In recent years, both chambers of Russia's legislature have been dominated by supporters of President Vladimir Putin, and now function more as a rubber stamp for Kremlin priorities than as independent political bodies.]

NEW MEDIA LAWS EXPAND PUNISHMENTS, BLOCK PLATFORMS

The Russian State Duma passed two bills in late December aimed at further restricting online speech and content in the country. Both were referred to the Federation Council, whose approval is required before President Putin can sign them into law. The first bill grants the Russian state powers to fine and imprison individuals for committing "online slander," with those convicted facing 3–5 years in prison, depending on the severity of the offense. Dissidents fear the law can be used to silence political opponents who publicly criticize the regime. The second bill grants government authorities the power to block western websites such as YouTube and Twitter for their purported discrimination or bias against Russian state-run media. This draft bill comes after YouTube began flagging videos uploaded by state-run media outlets such as RT, *Rossiya 24*, and TASS. (Reuters, December 23, 2020; Reuters, December 23, 2020)

RUSSIANS SEE WESTERN PLOT IN NAVALNY POISONING

Recent polling conducted by the Lavada Center, Russia's only independent polling institute, shows that only 15% of respondents believe that opposition activist Alexei Navalny was poisoned by FSB agents in an attempted assassination this past August. The survey findings also show that nearly 60% of Russians polled believe the poisoning was either staged or that what transpired was a western provocation against Russia.

Those perceptions are markedly different from opinions about the incident that prevail in the West. Doctors at the Berlin hospital who treated Navalny recently published an article describing the opposition leader's condition and symptoms in *The Lancet*, a leading medical journal. Using this and other relevant evidence, international experts have determined that Navalny was poisoned by Novichok, a chemical weapon developed by the Soviet Union and now possessed by Russia. (*Guardian*, December 23, 2020; Reuters, December 24, 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.]

THE SORRY STATE OF THE MOSCOW MISSION

In mid-December, the State Department announced that it was closing down its two remaining consulate offices in Russia, confining the American diplomatic presence in the country to the embassy in Moscow. It has since been revealed that recent diplomatic tensions between the U.S. and Russia are resulting in visa delays, preventing American maintenance workers from entering the country and making repairs on the embassy building, thereby increasing the fire and safety risk for American diplomats. Recent requests to move the embassy to a new building have also been rejected by Russian authorities. Additional restrictions have also been placed on U.S. diplomats themselves, including restricting their contact with ordinary citizens by banning them from speaking at universities. (*Washington Post*, December 25, 2020)

RUSSIAN SECURITY SERVICES FOIL ISIS PLOT IN DAGESTAN

FSB agents have revealed that the arrest of four suspects in the North Caucasus republic of Dagestan has disrupted a terror plot being organized by members of the Islamic State terrorist group. Investigators believe the accused terrorists planned to detonate explosives in, and carry out an assault on, buildings operated by Russian security services and the Interior Ministry in Makhachkala, the regional capital. In addition to weapons and explosives, arresting officers also captured mobile phones that purportedly contain "exchanges with organizers located abroad." (*Deutsche Welle*, December 26, 2020)