



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; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Corruption; Central Africa; Russia; Ukraine

SEVEN YEARS ON, A STEP TOWARD CRIMEAN JUSTICE

Nearly seven years after Russia's military seized control of the Crimean Peninsula, the European Court of Human Rights has agreed to hear arguments in a case brought by Ukrainians alleging that human rights violations were perpetrated by the invaders during the annexation. Among the alleged abuses were abductions and forced disappearances, unlawful detentions, and the suppression of media outlets in the days and weeks after the operation. Absent from the charges, however, are allegations of civilian killings, the imprisonment of foreign journalists, and the seizure of property belonging to Ukrainian soldiers stationed on the peninsula - complaints for which the Court found insufficient evidence to proceed. The court is also not judging the legality of the annexation itself; the proceedings will only address specific grievances brought forth by the Ukrainian plaintiffs. (Reuters, January 14, 2021)

SOBOL'S CAMPAIGN MANAGER UNDER THE MICROSCOPE

The campaign manager of Russian dissident and 2021 Duma hopeful Lyubov Sobol found a bug in her cellphone after serving a week-long prison sentence in a detention center outside Moscow. Olga Klyuchnikova first noticed her phone had been tampered with during daily fifteen minute allowance periods when she could call her family while still behind bars. The screws on her phone had visibly been opened and apps were malfunctioning. After her release, Klyuchnikova allowed producers at the "Navalny Live" YouTube channel to disassemble her phone on camera and found a planted device complete with its own SIM card, microphone, GPS tracker, and other components. Klyuchnikova plans to file a complaint with the Russian Investigative Committee, whose responsibility it is to investigate police misconduct. (*Meduza*, January 14, 2021)

RUSSIA'S MILITARY INSTRUCTORS IN AFRICA EYE THE EXITS

Three hundred Russian military instructors sent to the Central African Republic at the end of last year are being withdrawn, according to a communique from the Russian Mission to the United Nations. The troops, alleged to be mercenaries belonging to the Wagner Group, arrived in CAR last month to shore up security before and during the country's general election. During their deployment, the Russian instructors worked in coordination with UN peacekeepers and Rwandan troops stationed in the country. According to an anonymous source, the Russians are being pulled out in order to avoid friendly fire incidents between peacekeeping factions. It is still unknown how a recent rebel strike on the capital of Bangui will affect the withdrawal. (*The Moscow Times*, January 15, 2021)

RUSSIA WANTS OUT OF THE OPEN SKIES TREATY

Some two months after the U.S. finalized its own withdrawal, the Kremlin has announced its intention to leave the Open Skies Treaty. The agreement, which came into effect in 2002, allows signatories to fly reconnaissance flights over each other's airspace in an effort to alleviate military tensions after the Cold War. Following the U.S. withdrawal, Russia attempted to work with the remaining signatories on conditions to ensure its continued participation in the agreement, but ultimately decided to withdraw from the treaty after learning Western allies would still transfer data from reconnaissance flights to the United States. The final months of America's participation in the Open Skies Treaty were marred by tensions with Russia, with both Washington and Moscow restricting flights over Alaska and Kaliningrad, respectively. Russia's withdrawal from the treaty will ultimately need to be approved by the Russian State Duma. (*Defense News*, January 15, 2021)

YET ANOTHER EUROPEAN NGO DECLARED "UNDESIRABLE"

The Council of Europe is requesting an explanation from the Russian Ministry of Justice as to why its "Association of Schools of Political Studies" NGO was blacklisted as an "undesirable organization" under recently expanded Russian law. The organization exists to train the next generation of leaders in developing democracies in Eastern Europe and North Africa by organizing seminars and conferences on human rights, democratization, and other topics. "I cannot stress enough how problematic is the notion that an organization such as the Association of Schools of Political Studies... aiming to organize civic education activities based on the Council of Europe values and principles, would represent a threat," reads the letter sent by Council of Europe Secretary-General Marija Pejcinovic Buric to Russian Justice Minister Konstantin Chuychenko. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 16, 2021)

A BITTER WELCOME FOR NAVALNY

Russian dissident and opposition leader Alexei Navalny returned to Moscow on January 17th for the first time since being evacuated to Germany last August after falling violently ill on a domestic Russian flight. Navalny was originally scheduled to land at Vnukovo airport, where thousands of his supporters had gathered to meet him, until transport officials reported runway blockage and closed the airport to incoming flights, rerouting Navalny's flight across town, to Sheremetyevo airport. Upon landing, Navalny briefly addressed the media and said, "I know that I'm right. I fear nothing."

His reprieve from official pressure, however, was fleeting. At passport control, the dissident was detained by police. Navalny had been warned in the days leading up to his return that he could be subject to arrest upon arrival in Russia. The reason stems from the fact that, while recovering in Berlin (from a poisoning allegedly perpetrated by Russian government agents), he missed a police reporting date, thereby violating the terms of a suspended sentence he received in 2017 on politically motivated embezzlement charges. (*BBC*, January 17, 2021)