



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Europe; Iran; Russia

REGIONAL UNIVERSITY EXPELS STUDENT PROTESTORS

Two students at Astrakhan State University in southern Russia were expelled from their academic programs after participating in local demonstrations in support of opposition leader Alexei Navalny on January 23rd. One of the students, Vera Inozemtseva, is now suing the university and demanding that its rector, Konstantin Markelov, resign from his post. Inozemtseva believes she is being targeted due to her history of political activity. She had previously worked for Alexei Navalny's political campaign in 2017, while he prepared to run for the Russian presidency the following year. Inozemtseva's plight has captured the attention of opposition party "Yabloko," which is now petitioning the Russian Federal Ministry of Education to remove Rector Markelov from his position. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, February 11, 2021)

LAVROV THREATENS EU OVER SANCTIONS

In response to indications that the European Union is on the verge of levying stiff new sanctions against Russia over its arrest of Alexei Navalny, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has leveled a diplomatic ultimatum at European leaders. "In the event that we again see sanctions imposed in some sectors that create risks for our economy, including in the most sensitive spheres... we have to be ready for that. If you want peace then prepare for war," Lavrov said in an interview with pro-Kremlin TV host Vladimir Solovyov, implying that Moscow was preparing to cut itself off economically from the EU. Shortly thereafter, however, Kremlin spokesman Dmitri Peskov downplayed the comment, claiming it to have been taken out of context. However, he did reiterate Russia's need to develop economic self-sufficiency if Europe decided to engage in "extremely destructive" moves. (*Deutsche Welle*, February 12, 2021)

NAVALNY SUPPORTERS RETHINK PROTEST TACTICS

Back-to-back weekends of demonstrations and thousands of arrests nationwide have prompted members of Alexei Navalny's political team to rethink their protest tactics, moving forward. In order to avoid direct confrontations with police which can easily turn violent, organizers are now urging demonstrators to show their support for the imprisoned dissident by gathering in building courtyards and flashing their cellphone flashlights for short periods of time, decentralizing the demonstrations away from city centers. The first such event was held on the evening of February 14th, when thousands of supporters across the country used the tactic and posted about it on social media. (*The Moscow Times*, February 9, 2021; *The Moscow Times*, February 15, 2021)

WHELAN LAWYER: SWAP TALKS ARE ONGOING

Talks to secure the release of Paul Whelan, a former U.S. Marine who was sentenced to 16 years in prison by a Russian court on allegations of espionage, are now ongoing. According to Whelan's lawyer, Vladimir Zhrebekov, "negotiations are underway and the question of a handover will be resolved in the coming two to three months." He added that the most recent round of talks were initiated by the Biden administration. In exchange for Whelan's release, Russian authorities are looking for the return of Russian nationals currently being held in U.S. prisons, such as arms dealer Viktor Bout and drug smuggler Konstantin Yaroshenko. Zhrebekov did not indicate whether negotiators were also discussing the possible release of Trevor Reed, another former Marine serving a nine-year sentence in Russia for allegedly endangering Moscow police officers during his arrest for public intoxication. (Reuters, February 15, 2021)

CYBERATTACK ON FRANCE LINKED TO RUSSIAN HACKER GROUP

The French National Agency for the Security of Information Systems (ANSII) has released a report entitled "Sandworm Intrusion Set Campaign Targeting Centreon Systems," which details a protracted cyber attack against French software firm Centreon. The attack, which lasted from 2017 to 2020, targeted information technology providers as well as Air France and the French Ministry of Justice. While not explicitly blaming Russia, ANSII has linked the attack to Sandworm, a hacking group associated with Russia's military intelligence service, the GRU. The French attack, the report notes, bears a resemblance to the recently-discovered SolarWinds data breach in the U.S. (*France24*, February 16, 2021)

RUSSIA, IRAN KICK OFF JOINT NAVAL DRILL

Russian and Iranian armed forces launched a joint naval drill in the Indian Ocean on February 16th. The drill is part of a larger exercise dubbed "Iran-Russia Maritime Security Belt 2021," the second maneuver of its kind since 2019. According to Rear Admiral Gholamreza Tahani, deputy commander of the Iranian Navy, the drill is intended "to enhance security of international maritime trade, confront maritime piracy and terrorism, and exchange information." However, the intensifying military cooperation between Moscow and Tehran comes amid growing geopolitical tensions with the U.S. and an as-yet uncertain Iran policy on the part of the new administration in Washington. (*Times of Israel*, February 16, 2021)