



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2450

March 25, 2021 **Matt Maldonado, Arianna G. Guerrero, Ilan I. Berman**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Corruption; Europe; Middle East; Russia; Ukraine

### HEZBOLLAH CURRIES FAVOR IN MOSCOW

A delegation of officials from Lebanon's Hezbollah militia has visited Moscow to discuss the situation in Lebanon and the broader Middle East. The delegation, headed by Mohammad Raad, leader of Hezbollah's parliamentary bloc, met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in a meeting that Raad characterized to Hezbollah's *Al-Manar* TV station as "friendly and frank." The visit comes as Lebanon finds itself in its worst economic crisis in decades, and remains mired in political gridlock that has prevented the formation of a new Cabinet. (Associated Press, March 14, 2021)

### THREE NGOS FILE LEGAL CASE AGAINST WAGNER...

Advocacy groups from Russia, France and Syria have filed a landmark criminal complaint against Russian private military contractor Wagner Group, accusing its mercenaries of torturing and beheading a Syrian detainee in 2017. The legal case, filed in Moscow, accuses six Russian contract soldiers of participating in the killing of Muhammad Taha al-Abdullah in Homs. Abdullah had been conscripted into the Syrian army but allegedly defected and was captured by Russian paramilitary forces. The complaint, filed on behalf of the victim's family, "is important because we aren't just dealing with a single crime," explained Alexander Cherkasov of the Memorial Human Rights Center. "This is a whole wave of impunity." Russia has denied any involvement with the killing, or the use of Wagner mercenaries abroad. (*Al Jazeera*, March 15, 2021)

### ...AS PAPER TARGETED

Russian investigative newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* has announced that its offices in Moscow had been targeted in what it has termed a "chemical attack." According to various employees and visitors who were on the scene, there had been a pungent chemical odor emanating from the building that was also detectable down the street. Teams from the Emergency Situations Ministry, Interior Ministry, and the Federal Security Service all mobilized to inspect an apparent substance spilled in the front entrance of the building. According to the newspaper's staff, the smell was reminiscent of the one present in journalist Yulia Latynina's house and car when they were doused with an unknown chemical back in 2017. Dmitry Muratov, the paper's editor-in-chief, did not explicitly blame anyone for the attack, but did mention that, earlier that same day, three NGOs had filed a legal case against Wagner Group "based on our articles." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 15, 2021)

### PUTIN HOLDS MOSCOW RALLY TO CELEBRATE CRIMEAN ANNEXATION

March 18th marked the 7th anniversary of the Russian annexation of Crimea, and President Putin marked the occasion by appearing at a massive political rally at Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium. Despite state media claims that event organizers enforced strict COVID-19 protocols, live television feeds showed thousands of attendees standing in large bunches without masks, drawing criticism from observers who highlighted the dangers of the political theater. Putin's ruling "United Russia" party is currently polling at 27% approval heading into State Duma elections this September. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 19, 2021)

### UKRAINIANS STRIPPED OF LAND-OWNING RIGHTS IN CRIMEA

A 2020 edict from President Putin outlawing land ownership by foreign citizens in large swaths of Crimea went into effect last week, stripping Ukrainian still living on the peninsula of over 11,000 land plots. In total, the decree pertains to 19 of Crimea's 25 municipalities, including cities such as Yalta and Kerch. Those who do not sell or transfer their land by a specified future date will have it confiscated by state authorities. According to Kyiv, the confiscation of property from Ukrainian citizens in Russian-occupied Crimea fits into the cycle of oppression seen on the peninsula since 2014. (*UNIAN*, March 21, 2021; *UNIAN*, March 21, 2021)

## **MOSCOW RECALLS ENVOY AFTER "MURDER" SPAT**

The Russian Foreign Ministry recalled their ambassador from Washington last weekend in the wake of the latest diplomatic spat between the White House and the Kremlin. Ambassador Anatoli Antonov departed the United States after President Joe Biden called President Putin a "killer" during a recent interview, for which the Russian President responded with, "It takes one to know one," days later. U.S. officials had sharply criticized Russia for its imprisonment of political dissident Alexei Navalny and alleged interference in the 2020 U.S. presidential elections in the weeks leading up to the incident. The formal withdrawal of an ambassador represents a major step for Moscow, and a serious deterioration in bilateral ties; even the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia and subsequent application of western sanctions didn't result in such a step on either side. (*The Moscow Times*, March 21, 2021)