



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Russia; North Africa

HUNTING DOWN THE OPPOSITION

Russia's crackdown on political dissent ahead of the 2021 parliamentary elections intensified in late May when Andrei Pivovarov, the former head of Open Russia, was removed from a plane bound for Poland at the Saint Petersburg international airport and arrested by police. Open Russia is an NGO funded by exiled Russian oligarch and Putin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Pivovarov had already disbanded Open Russia over fears that its employees would be prosecuted under a Russian law classifying the organization as "undesirable." Pivovarov has since been transported to Krasnodar for legal proceedings of an unknown nature. Russian police also arrested and raided the home of politician Dmitry Gudkov, who had been planning to run for parliament this fall. (Associated Press, June 1, 2021)

A STEP BACKWARD FOR RUSSIA IN AFRICA

During an interview last week, Sudan's General Staff Chief, Mohammed Othman al-Hussein, announced that his country was reevaluating its recent deal with Russia permitting Moscow to build and maintain a naval installation on the Sudanese Red Sea coast. The agreement, which allows Russia to build and hold the naval facility for 25 years in exchange for the provision of military aid to Khartoum, had been signed by strongman Omar al-Bashir before he was ousted from power back in 2019. The news has generated consternation in Moscow. Viktor Bondarev, the former Commander-in-Chief of the Russian Aerospace Forces and a current Russian Senator, stated that "there are no objective reasons" for why Khartoum would like to revise the agreement. (ABC News, June 2, 2021)

A HELPING HAND FROM MOSCOW

A Moscow court has ruled in favor of the extradition of Belarusian citizen Andrei Kazimirov back to his home country. Kazimirov had fled to Russia to escape brutal treatment at the hands of police during nationwide protests last summer. According to the Moscow Helsinki Group, there are at least six Belarusian citizens awaiting extradition back to their home countries, in addition to countless others hiding from authorities. Extradition between Moscow and Minsk is simplified by the "Union State" status that exists *de jure* between the two countries. (Reuters, June 3, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: In the days since Belarus diverted a Ryanair flight over its airspace and arrested opposition journalist Roman Protasevich, Russian authorities have come out in support of Minsk's aggressive persecution of opposition elements. Now, in the wake of last week's summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko in Sochi, it looks like Moscow is taking its support one step further, and making its own territory inhospitable for Lukashenko's political opponents.]

THE TRUE IMPACT OF THE "FOREIGN AGENT" DESIGNATION

VTimes, the independent Russian news outlet which was founded in October 2020 by former journalists from *Vedomosti*, has announced that it will shut its doors on June 12th due to financial difficulties related to its recent classification as a "foreign agent" under Russian law. According to staff members, the recent legal classification "destroyed" *VTimes*' business model, resulting in lost sponsorships and an editorial stigma that chilled sources, making them too afraid to speak to the outlet's journalists. All contingency options drawn up by the publication's staff put employees at risk of criminal charges, leading to the outlet's ultimate decision to close. Popular outlet *Meduza*, meanwhile, is currently fighting its "foreign agent" status in court and has launched a crowdfunding campaign to avoid a similar fate as *VTimes*. (*The Moscow Times*, June 3, 2021)

RUSSIA LOOKS BEYOND THE DOLLAR

The Russian National Wealth Fund is preparing to convert its remaining assets of U.S. dollars to other denominations and to eliminate the currency from its reserves entirely. In place of the dollar, Euros are expected to comprise 40% of the fund, followed by 30% in the Chinese Yuan, and 20% in gold reserves. The final 10% will likely be split between the Japanese Yen and British Pound. The elimination of the dollar was announced by Finance Minister Anton Siluanov at the annual St. Petersburg International Economic Forum last week.

The timing of the move is significant. It reflects recent U.S. economic sanctions levied against Russia by the Biden administration for election interference and cyberattacks. It also comes ahead of the upcoming bilateral summit between Presidents Biden and Putin, which is slated to take place on June 16th in Geneva, Switzerland. (*CNBC*, June 3, 2021)
