



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

THE COMMUNIST CHALLENGE TO PUTIN'S RUSSIA

Russia's ruling "United Russia" party is facing a growing political challenge from the country's communist party. In the wake of last month's parliamentary elections, a Communist Party candidate, Mikhail Lobanov, has risen from obscurity to national prominence as a result of his charges that the Kremlin stole the vote via an "opaque system of online voting." Lobanov's complaints stem from the fact that, throughout the run-up to the mid-September polls, he held a significant lead in his quest for a parliamentary seat in his district in southeast Moscow. However, Kremlin-backed candidate Yevgeny Popov came from behind to win a landslide victory - a result that Lobanov has decried as rigged.

Those claims have garnered significant popular support, as more and more candidates and political activists associated with the Communist Party, or KPRF, rise in national prominence. "We see this interesting trend where regional branches of the Communist Party have become much more opposition-minded. For the Kremlin, this is a real threat," notes Tatiana Stanovaya, a Russian political consultant. (*MSN*, October 6, 2021)

[EDITORS' NOTE: The challenge is, in part, generational in nature. Historically, Putin has benefitted from the backing of older voters - a base of support that has started to dissipate with the rise of a younger generation of Russians increasingly discontented with the state of the nation. Russia expert Mark Galeotti has termed this as "one of the really powerful tectonic plates in Russian politics that is beginning to shift."]

NOW, PLANS UNDERWAY FOR AN ARCTIC FLEET

The Kremlin is mulling the creation of a new Arctic Fleet to protect the country's interests in that region. "The Russian Arctic Fleet, a new structure, is under consideration," the official TASS news agency has reported, citing military sources. "The plan is that the infrastructure of the new association will be separate from the Northern and Pacific fleets. In the future, it will have ships and special equipment suitable for the Arctic." The new detachment would ensure the safety of the northern sea route and Arctic coast, while simultaneously allowing other fleets guarding the region to focus on combat missions.

The plan is the latest development in Russia's expanding strategic designs on the region. Earlier this year, satellite images captured a buildup of military bases and underground facilities there. Shortly after the release of the photos, the Russian Northern Fleet held a series of drills, which included air and ground exercises. It involved more than 10,000 personnel, 15 aircraft, and about 30 combat ships, submarines, and support vessels. (*The Defense Post*, October 7, 2021)

JUSTICE MINISTRY TARGETS MORE OUTLETS AND JOURNALISTS

The list of "foreign agents" designated by the Russian government expanded last week to include a slew of new entities and individuals, including investigative outlet Bellingcat, independent news website *Caucasian Knot*, *BBC Russian* correspondent Andrei Zakharov, *Dozhd* journalist Daniil Sotnikov, and several other journalists from various news outlets.

The news, while ominous, is hardly unexpected. Bellingcat is associated with in-depth investigations into events such as the poisonings of opposition activist Alexei Navalny and former spy Sergei Skripal, while the journalists designated have been involved in reporting stories critical of the Kremlin. "I expected this decision in the same way all independent journalists should expect it," Sotnikov told *The Moscow Times*. (*The Moscow Times*, October 8, 2021)

MALIAN DEAL WITH WAGNER LOOMS

U.S. military officials have joined their French counterparts in warning Mali against making any deal to use Russia's Wagner Group mercenaries. The deal, which reportedly would offer Wagner nearly \$11 million a month to provide security for senior officials and military training, "would complicate the international response in support of the transition government," according to Pentagon spokesperson Cindi King. King added that, "[g]iven Wagner Group's record[...] any role for Russian mercenaries in Mali will likely exacerbate an already fragile and unstable situation." The U.S. had previously been providing training and other support to Mali, but that support was suspended following an August 2020 coup that deposed elected leaders in the African nation. France also withdrew its support from the country earlier this year. Although Mali's interim government has denied that a deal with Wagner is in the offing, the withdrawal of support has left it with few other options in the face of a worsening security situation. (*Voice of America*, October 5, 2021)