



# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2503

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**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; NATO; Europe; Russia ; Ukraine; West Africa

## THE LONG ARM OF THE KREMLIN COMES TO BERLIN

Against the backdrop of deepening tensions over Ukraine, a new diplomatic crisis has erupted between Berlin and Moscow. The German government is expelling two Russian diplomats from its territory following a court verdict surrounding the 2019 death of a former Chechen rebel military commander. The killing, which was perpetrated by a Russian national in the German capital, was found to have been carried out "on the order of state agencies of the Russian Federation" in what authorities in Berlin have termed a "serious violation" of national sovereignty. The victim, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, had been a commander of separatist forces in the restive Russian region between 2000 and 2004, when Chechnya sought once more to separate from the Russian Federation. He had been an asylum seeker in Germany since 2016. (*BBC*, December 15, 2021)

## MOSCOW'S LATEST WEAPON AGAINST UKRAINE: CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Russia's military buildup of recent weeks opposite Ukraine has put the U.S. and Europe on high alert, and fanned global fears of a new Russian military incursion into its former satellite. The Kremlin, moreover, seems to be actively preparing the pretext for such action. In late December, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu alleged that irregular U.S. forces were present in Ukraine's Donbass region and attempting to instigate hostilities.

"We have identified the presence of over 120 members of U.S. mercenary groups in the cities of Avdiivka and Krasny Liman to commit provocations... Tanks filled with unidentified chemical components were delivered to the cities of Avdeevka and Krasny Liman to commit provocations," Shoigu charged in comments carried by state news agency TASS. Russia's military chief provided no evidence whatsoever to substantiate his allegations, however. (*The Moscow Times*, December 21, 2021)

## RUSSIA'S NOT-SO-HIDDEN HAND IN AFRICA

The activities of Russia's most notorious group of mercenaries is causing growing international consternation. Sixteen European governments have issued a joint public letter "firmly" condemning the deployment of mercenaries affiliated with Russia's Wagner Group to the west African state of Mali. The statement, which was signed by France, the UK, Germany and Italy, among other nations, emphasizes "the involvement of the Russian Federation government in providing material support to the deployment of the Wagner group in Mali" and calls upon the Kremlin "to revert to a responsible and constructive behavior in the region." (*CNN*, December 24, 2021)

## PUTIN THROWS DOWN THE GAUNTLET

If the United States and NATO don't accede to Russian demands, the Kremlin could contemplate a range of options, Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned. Putin's statement comes on the heels of demands from his government that NATO pledge not to incorporate Ukraine in the future, and that the Alliance roll back its military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. If the West doesn't move quickly to comply, Putin said, Russia would be forced to take "adequate military technical measures" to prevent further encroachment by the bloc. Just a day later, Russia's Deputy Defense Minister, Alexander Fomin, echoed Putin's warning when he stressed there was a "high risk" of military conflict over Ukraine if the current impasse continues. (*Associated Press*, December 26, 2021; *ABC News*, December 27, 2021)

## MOSCOW BANS MEMORIAL

In a major blow to civil society and historical memory, Russia's Supreme Court has ordered the closure of Memorial International, the highly-respected human rights group dedicated to exposing the atrocities and excesses of the Soviet era. The ruling follows a November request by Russia's Prosecutor General that Memorial International be dissolved for repeated violations of the country's draconian "foreign agents" law, which forces organizations to disclose foreign funding.

Memorial's members have decried the move. The court's decision was "purely ideological," Oleg Orlov, a member of the organization's board, has told reporters. "Allegedly, we do not assess the Soviet Union and Soviet history the right way. But this is our assessment, we have the right to do it."

The group's supporters have expressed outrage as well. The Russian Supreme Court's decision represents "a grave insult to victims of the Russian Gulag," Amnesty International said in an official statement. "International Memorial is a highly respected human rights organization that has worked tirelessly to document the atrocities and political repression carried out under the rule of Joseph Stalin and other Soviet leaders. By closing down the organization, Russian authorities trample on the memory of millions of victims lost to the Gulag." (*CNN*, December 28, 2021)