



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; Russia; Africa; Ukraine

TARGETING THE LEGAL DEFENDERS

In recent years, Russia has experienced an exodus of people fleeing President Vladimir Putin's increasingly repressive regime – a trend that has been dramatically accelerated by the Ukraine war. Some of Russia's best-known lawyers are now among them. Many of the attorneys who have defended Russia's opposition politicians and journalists are coming under growing pressure from the Kremlin, which has begun threatening them with criminal charges and punishment for their role in representing opposition figures.

Take Vadim Prokhorov, for example. During his thirty-year career, Prokhorov defended assassinated opposition politician Boris Nemtsov and opposition journalist Vladimir Kara-Murza. After Kara-Murza received a 25-year sentence earlier this year for his criticism of the war in Ukraine, Prokhorov was threatened with criminal charges for defending him, and chose to flee. The Kremlin's efforts to suppress lawyers like Prokhorov represents a grave threat to Russia's opposition, since in many cases their trials are closed. As such, only lawyers for those on trial are allowed access to see and report on what is truly happening in the already opaque Russian judicial system. (*Wall Street Journal*, May 4, 2023)

COUNTERING WAGNER IN AFRICA

Russia's Wagner mercenary group is working to expand its footprint in Africa, and, in response, the United States is stepping up its intelligence sharing with African partners. In recent months, the Biden administration has significantly increased the amount of sensitive intelligence it is sharing with African allies, such as the Administration's decision to inform Chad of an alleged Wagner plot to destabilize the country. This marks a notable shift, as Washington has not traditionally had strong intelligence relationships with African states. However, the White House's concerns over Wagner's activities on the continent, especially its connections to African governments, have been significant enough to change that long standing norm. One U.S. official stated that, "Where we can find credible information that undermines Wagner's malign influence, of course, we want more people to know about it, and that includes our partners, and the public." (*Politico*, May 7, 2023)

THE REAL STATE OF RUSSIAN INDUSTRY

When you look at the figures and statistics coming out of Moscow, Russia's economy and industrial sector appear to be thriving in spite of Western sanctions. However, Russia's pollution data paints a decidedly different picture. According to data gathered by the European Space Agency's Sentinel-5P satellite, pollution in Russia's industrial areas has fallen significantly, which in turn indicates that industrial output is falling.

The information is revealing. Projections of Russia's economic future have been hotly debated since the start of the invasion of Ukraine, as have estimates of the effectiveness of Western sanctions against the Kremlin imposed in response. Meanwhile, the trustworthiness of economic data provided by the Russian government itself is increasingly in doubt, as the Putin regime finds itself at pains to paint a rosy picture of conditions within the country. Thus, new indicators of Russia's economic growth that are gathered independent of Moscow are increasingly essential to develop accurate projections. As the European Central Bank has noted, its model – which incorporates the pollution data cited above – reflects "a loss of momentum in the Russian economy [as] compared to official statistics." (*Wall Street Journal*, May 5, 2023)

FLASHPOINT: ZAPORIZHZHIA

Ukraine's long-awaited counteroffensive is looming, and with it concerns about the security of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant are growing. The United Nation's nuclear oversight watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency, recently released a statement expressing alarm about the plant's security and the risks of a nuclear incident there. The fears are magnified by reports of a Russian decision to evacuate civilians from the surrounding area, especially as this could include the plant's Ukrainian staff, who have continued to ensure the facility's security and operations even while under Russian occupation. The London-based Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) has warned that Zaporizhzhia, which Russia seized early in its invasion, could become a target for Russian sabotage, which Moscow would then blame on the Ukrainian offensive. (*Newsweek*, May 7, 2023)