



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: International Economics and Trade; Warfare; Global Health; Japan; Russia; Ukraine

RUSSIA'S HIDDEN EPIDEMIC

Half of all HIV/AIDS cases on the European continent now come from Russia, highlighting a hidden epidemic that has passed largely unnoticed by officials in Brussels – and unremarked upon by the Kremlin. Citing the *To Be Precise* news portal, Russia expert Paul Goble notes that 1.2 million Russians officially suffer from the diseases, making it "correct to speak of an HIV/AIDS epidemic in Russia." The Russian government, however, isn't seriously addressing the issue, or even accurately accounting for the scope of the problem. Rather, writes Goble in his *Window on Eurasia* blog, "Moscow has been cutting back spending on testing and on medications for HIV/AIDS people in order to fund Putin's war in Ukraine, a truly sad development after Russia had radically increased spending on both things in the years before the covid epidemic." (*Window on Eurasia*, December 5, 2023)

JAPAN UPS THE ANTE

The government of Prime Minister Fumio Kishida in Tokyo is ratcheting up its economic pressure on Moscow over the ongoing war against Ukraine. In mid-December, Japan's government announced that it was adding dozens of firms and other organizations to its sanctions list, and imposing export bans on nearly 500 Russian organizations (as well as Belarusian entities and those of half-a-dozen other countries). The new restrictions, which are set to kick in on December 22nd, are part of the pledge made by the G7 nations back in May to "starve Russia of G7 technology, industrial equipment and services that support its war machine." (*France24*, December 15, 2023)

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO NAVALNY?

Russia's most famous and high profile political prisoner has gone missing. *Meduza* reports that lawyers for anti-corruption activist Alexei Navalny have been unable to speak to their client, or even to ascertain his whereabouts, for over a week – sparking concerns about his safety. "Unless something truly tragic has happened, Alexey Navalny's disappearance likely means that he's being transferred to a high-security penal colony (Russia's supermax prisons) to serve his 19-year sentence handed down in August 2023 for the crime of 'extremism,'" *Meduza* writes. "Prisoner transfers are a grueling, dangerous, and unpredictable process. It's also one of the most humiliating experiences of being incarcerated in Russia, say human rights activists and former inmates." (*Meduza*, December 12, 2023)

COUP-PROOFING THE KREMLIN

This summer, the Wagner paramilitary group led by oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin – long used by the Kremlin as a tool of foreign policy – came perilously close to carrying out a palace coup against Russian President Vladimir Putin. In the wake of that abortive putsch, Russia's government is moving to erect new safeguards against future potential power grabs. The State Duma, Russia's lower house of parliament, has adopted a package of laws allowing the country's National Guard, known as the *Rosgvardia*, to establish volunteer units as a way of strengthening protections around the presidency. "In accordance with the amendments, volunteer formations will be able to be created by the Rosgvardia by the decision of the President," the legislation reads. These units "can be involved in the performance of certain tasks in the field of defense during the period of mobilization, martial law, in conditions of armed conflict, during the conduct of CT [counterterrorism], etc." (*duma.gov.ru*, December 12, 2023)

THINKING BEYOND UKRAINE

Proponents of ongoing support for Ukraine in its fight against Russian aggression often cite the Kremlin's enduring imperial ambitions, as well as the dangers of further Russian attempts at European conquest should Kyiv be allowed to fall. Russian officials, meanwhile, are not denying this interpretation. To the contrary, more and more are making clear that that reading of Russia's long-term strategy is, in fact, the correct one.

In a recent interview on state television, Andrey Gurulyov, a member of the Russian State Duma and former military commander, made clear that the Russian government plans to go "further" than Ukraine in its war plans. "If you consider it in a global sense, the future of our country and us personally, our children and grandchildren, our descendants... we have a future," Gurulyov told Vladimir Solovyov, the Kremlin's most high-profile propagandist. "We look towards it with optimism. Either way, we will win, there is no other option. We will confidently get there [Ukraine] and then go further." Gurulyov's comments came on the heels of Russian President Vladimir Putin's annual press conference, in which he articulated a clear vision of victory in Ukraine against the backdrop of dwindling Western support for Kyiv. (*Newsweek*, December 17, 2023)