



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Energy Security; Europe Military; International Economics and Trade; Warfare; Europe; India; Russia; United States

AKUNIN ON THE OUTS

One of Russia's most famous novelists has officially been deemed *persona non grata* after expressing support for Ukraine in conversations that were secretly taped. Boris Akunin, a critically acclaimed essayist who is the author of wildly popular contemporary mysteries, has been officially listed as an "extremist" by the Russian federal financial monitoring agency, ROSFINMONITORING. His crime? In a taped conversation with Russian media personalities Vladimir Kuznetsov and Alexey Stolyarov, Akunin justified Ukrainian drone strikes against Russian cities in response to the Kremlin's campaign of aggression. (Itar-TASS, December 18, 2023)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Akunin, the pen name of Grigory Chkhartishvili, has been critical of the Kremlin for years, and now lives in London in self-imposed exile. As such, he is not at personal risk as a result of the decision. However, the designation means that his novels will no longer be freely available in Russia, as institutions stop their publication and remove them from shelves in order to comply with the Kremlin's edict. Indeed, the bookstore chain "Chitai-Gorod-Bukvoyed" has already announced that it was suspending sales of Akunin's books as a result of his "anti-Russian" statements.]

THE CASE FOR SEIZING RUSSIAN ASSETS

In order to secure greater support across the political aisle for continued support for Ukraine, the White House should embrace Congressional proposals for the seizure of Russian assets, a leading foreign affairs columnist has suggested. "For more than a year, the administration resisted a bipartisan effort to pass legislation that would give President Biden the authority to seize Russian sovereign assets currently frozen in U.S. banks and give them to Ukraine," writes Josh Rogin in the *Washington Post*. That suggestion, he explains, is popular on Capitol Hill, where the House Foreign Affairs Committee voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Rebuilding Economic Prosperity and Opportunity for Ukrainians Act (Repo Act) back in November. In turn, a pivot by the Biden administration to support the measure "could provide political cover for Republicans who want to support Ukraine but are afraid of backlash from the MAGA part of the GOP." It could also lead European capitals, where the vast majority of Russian funds are escrowed, to follow suit.

The stakes, Rogin notes, are high. "Without Russia's seized assets, Ukraine could lose its ability to survive as a functioning country. And that is exactly Putin's strategy." (*Washington Post*, December 28, 2023)

RUSSIA ISSUES A WARNING

Russian officials, meanwhile, are warning that such a step would have grave consequences. If the United States moves to seize Russian assets, Moscow is prepared to sever diplomatic relations with Washington altogether, deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov has said. "We are ready for any scenario. The U.S. should not be under any illusion, if it exists, that Russia is, so to speak, desperately clinging to diplomatic relations with this country," Ryabkov made clear in a recent interview with Interfax. (*Meduza*, December 22, 2023)

JITTERS IN AMSTERDAM

The outgoing army chief of The Netherlands has issued a stark warning – that the northwest European nation needs to gird itself for possible future conflict with Russia. Lieutenant-General Martin Wijnen has counseled that Amsterdam needs to follow the example of other regional capitols – such as Helsinki, Vilnius and the like – and prepare for a future fight against Moscow. "The Netherlands should not think our safety is guaranteed because we are 1,500 kilometers away [from Russians]," Wijnen has said. "There is only one language that Russia understands, and that is one of a strong military," he continued. "The Netherlands must learn again that all members of society must be ready when things go wrong." (*Newsweek*, December 28, 2023)

NOW, NEW DELHI TILTS TOWARD MOSCOW

Since the start of the Ukraine war in February 2022, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has taken great pains to stay on the sidelines of the conflict – even as his government has taken advantage of Western sanctions to purchase Russian energy at bargain basement prices. But as the Ukraine war has dragged on, a strategic reassessment seems to have taken place in New Delhi, and India is tilting toward Moscow more and more. This realignment was on display in recent days, when Indian Foreign Minister S. Jaishankar visited the Russian capitol to hold consultations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and other top officials. Among the topics discussed was a further expansion of trade between the two countries – which hit an "all time high" of \$50 billion last year – as well as the "prospects for military technical cooperation, including the joint production of modern types of weapons." (Associated Press, December 28, 2023)