

Review of Russia's Policy in the Post-Soviet Space

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Russia claims regional hegemony in the post-Soviet space and considers that strengthening Western positions in the region poses a threat to its national interests. The purpose of our review is to provide readers with information about important events related to Russia's policy in the post-Soviet space. The review is a biweekly publication and will be useful for everyone – decision-makers, public employees, media representatives and other people who are interested in the ongoing processes in post-Soviet countries.

Main Events:

- In his new op-ed, the President of Russia tries to legitimise Soviet aggression against the Baltic states.
- In the promotional documentary film, the President of Russia discusses the “transfer of Russian territories” to the post-Soviet states.
- The Russo-Ukrainian “spy war” continues.
- Sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU over its aggressive actions in Ukraine have been extended for six more months.
- The President of Belarus accuses Russian and Polish forces of meddling in his country's presidential election campaign and trying to discredit him.
- Belarus and Russia agreed on mutual visa recognition.
- The President of Uzbekistan met with the President of Russia during his visit to Moscow.
- Latvia bans the Russia's state channels as part of the fight against Russian propaganda.
- McDonald's in Ukraine Says “Nyet” to Russian Language.

Putin's Op-Ed and the Baltic States' Protest

Main Event: On June 18, 2020, the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, published an [article](#) (“The Real Lessons of the 75th Anniversary of World War II”) in the American magazine, *The National Interest*. The article is a new WWII narrative and explains the war causes.

Event in Details: The article also describes the Baltic States' annexation by the Soviet Union. According to Putin:

- It is unfair to say that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 23, 1939) led to the outbreak of WWII. Every leading country carries responsibility to some extent.
- Under the auspices of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Baltic states were incorporated into the Soviet Union on a contractual basis with the consent of the elected authorities and in

line with the international and the state law of that time. According to Putin, the occupation of the Baltic states was conditioned by "strategic military defense goals."

The Baltic States' Protest

The Baltic states do not agree with Putin's vision and claim that the Soviet Union acted as an aggressor against them. Under the additional protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union occupied Lithuania on June 15 and Latvia and Estonia on June 17, 1940. In July, puppet governments were formed in all three states and in August, upon their "request," the Baltic states were admitted to the Soviet Union.

On June 18, the Russian ambassadors were summoned to the Baltic Foreign Ministries and expressed protest over the Russian State Duma's latest initiative. On June 9, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the State Duma backed a bill that overturned the resolution approved by the Soviet Supreme Council on December 24, 1989, condemning the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The Baltic states deem this is an attempt to revise history.

Why the Event is Important: For Putin, modern day Russia is the successor to the Soviet Union and believes that representing the Soviet Union as an aggressor in WWII is an anti-Russian move and an attempt to "revise history." Therefore, promoting the Russian vision of WWII, Putin is trying to legitimize the Soviet aggression and recognize its special role in this war.

Putin's Territorial Claims

Main Event: On June 21, 2020, the Russian state channel "Россия 1" showed the documentary [film](#) entitled *Moscow. Putin. Kremlin*, where the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, states that: "In the process of the Soviet Union's formation, many of the republics that joined the Union acquired a large part of Russia's lands and traditional historical Russian territories."



Moscow. Putin. Kremlin. Source: film footage

Event in Details: According to Putin, while seceding from the Soviet Union, each republic should have maintained territories they owned at the moment they joined the Union and "should not have taken a gift from the Russian people." Putin did not specify which republics or territories he meant but said: "The Soviet Union was established on the basis of full equality with the right to secede; however, no procedures were prescribed." Crimea joining Russia in 2014 was "a democratic choice for the people of the peninsula," said Putin and added: "Crimea has always been ours, even from a legal point of view."

On the second day of the film's release, the Press Secretary of the President, Dmitry Peskov, tried to calm down the post-Soviet states. Peskov said Russia has no territorial claims against neighboring countries.

Why the Event is Important: The annexation of Crimea is a kind of message to some post-Soviet countries that under certain political circumstances Russia, with the use of military force, is ready to "seize" the "Russian" territories that the Kremlin considers fell under the possession of the Union republics in the process of the Soviet Union's formation or at a later time. Accordingly, pursuing Russia's political vector remains the only preventive measure against Putin's aggressive policy.

The Ukrainian "Spy" Detained in Russia

Main Event: On June 22, 2020, in Kursk Oblast, the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation detained Lt. Col. Dmitry Borzenkov, the Head of the Regional Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, on charges of treason and working for the Ukrainian Security Service.

Event in Details: According to the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation, Borzenkov secretly cooperated with one of the divisions of the Ukrainian Security Service, collected classified information and transferred it to the Ukrainian party. Kursk Oblast borders Ukraine.

In 2020, the relevant services of Ukraine and Russia detained a number of individuals on allegations of espionage.

- In January, the Federal Security Service of Russia reported that an individual had been detained in Crimea on suspicion of plotting to smuggle explosives into the Crimean Peninsula at the behest of the Ukrainian Special Services.
- On March 31, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) announced that a covert communication channel has been decrypted between a Ukrainian Navy senior official and a Russian Federal Security Service official in annexed Crimea.
- On April 14, the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU) arrested SBU Major General Valery Shaitanov on charges of treason and terrorism.
- On April 15, in annexed Crimea, Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) uncovered a Ukrainian intelligence "sabotage and terrorism" group in annexed Crimea. It reportedly included a female Russian military officer. According to the FSB, the Russian servicewoman had handed state secrets to Ukraine's military intelligence between 2017 and 2018.

- On May 6, the SBU arrested one individual on charges of espionage in favor of Russia. The detainee was accused of illegally sharing information about “modern missile systems.”

Why the Event is Important: After the events of 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and openly supported separatists in eastern Ukraine, the "spy war" between Russia and Ukraine intensified. There have been frequent reports of "spies" on both sides, indicating a high degree of military-political confrontation between Moscow and Kiev.

European Sanctions on Russia Have been Extended

Main Event: On June 19, 2020, European Union leaders supported a six-month extension of economic sanctions imposed against Russia over its role in the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Event in Details: The French President and the German Chancellor briefed other EU heads of state and governments that no progress had been made in implementing the Minsk agreement. The sanctions were first adopted in July 2014 after Russia illegally annexed Ukraine's Crimean peninsula and started providing military support for pro-Russia separatists in eastern Ukraine. Since then, the sanctions have been extended every six months. A formal decision to prolong the sanctions beyond their current July 31 expiry date is to be taken in the coming weeks.

Russian President Vladimir Putin proposed a freeze on economic sanctions on "humanitarian" grounds to allow countries to better combat the coronavirus pandemic. EU officials have rejected Putin's call.

European sanctions mainly target Russia's financial, energy and defense industries.

Why the Event is Important: The extension of the European sanctions is a signal to Russia that the EU's position towards Ukraine remains unchanged and that normal relations with Russia cannot be restored until peace is established in Ukraine.

The President of Belarus Accuses Russia and Poland of Elections Interference

Key Event: On June 25, 2020, the President of Belarus, Aleksander Lukashenko, accused Russia and Poland of interfering in the upcoming presidential election on August 9.

Event in Details: The interference is coming from "those who live in Poland and those who incite from Russia," Lukashenko said at a meeting with newly appointed government officials. Lukashenko later said there is "horrific fake news" being spread about him, some in anonymous Russian social media accounts. "It is not ours, the information is coming from Russia," he said. The Kremlin denied claims saying that Russia does not interfere in election campaigns of countries, especially Russia's allies.

Lukashenko has already detained two of his rivals, Viktor Babariko, the former Chairman of the Management Board of BelgazPrombank (a local offshoot of Russia's Gazprombank), and blogger Sergei Tikhanovski. After Babariko's arrest, Lukashenko said his government had thwarted a foreign destabilization plot to foment unrest in Belarus. In addition to the rivals, journalists were detained for covering anti-Lukashenko protests.

On June 28, at the meeting with supporters in Minsk, Lukashenko said Russia does not want to "lose Belarus" either politically or economically as this would "hit Russia's domestic policy hard." Lukashenko also shared his grievances with the President of Russia. On June 30, the Presidents of Russia and Belarus attended the ceremony to unveil the Rzhev Memorial to the Soviet Soldier.

Lukashenko is seeking his sixth term as president in the election scheduled for August 9.



The Presidents of Russia and Belarus at the opening ceremony of the Soviet Soldier Memorial. Source: РИА Новости

Why the Event is Important: This is the sixth election for Aleksander Lukashenko taking place in a different environment. Amid growing tensions between Russia and Belarus, Lukashenko doubts that Moscow considers him a viable candidate. In order to mobilize internal support, he is trying to completely neutralize the Kremlin's alleged candidate (Viktor Babariko) and in order to gain foreign support, tries to convince Putin that without Lukashenko Russia will face challenges.

Russia and Belarus Agreed on Mutual Recognition of Each Other's Visa

Key Event: On June 19, 2020, in Minsk, the Foreign Ministers of Russia and Belarus, Sergey Lavrov and Vladimir Makej, signed an agreement on the mutual recognition of each other's visas.

Event in Details: Under the agreement, citizens of third countries with a valid visa for either Russia or Belarus will be allowed to enter, leave and stay in the other country until their visa expires and

cross the land border of Russia and Belarus by rail or air and via major highways. According to Lavrov, the agreement aims at creating a unified integration space; the signing of the agreement "will be well perceived and ensure the joint construction of the Alliance state." The agreement was ready in 2018; however, it was not signed until now. In addition to internal bureaucratic procedures, Russia was also concerned about security; in particular, Belarus opened air borders to 80 countries in the fall of 2018. The exchange of border data was also a problem.

Why the Event is Important for Russia: Against the background of the problems in Belarus-Russia relations, the signing of a new agreement is becoming more symbolic than practical which is another successful step forward in the integration of the two countries.

Why the Event is Important for Belarus: For the President of Belarus, Aleksander Lukashenko, in the run-up to the elections (in Belarus, presidential elections are scheduled for August 9, 2020), the signing of the agreement could be significant in two ways. First, in terms of domestic policy, this is a message to voters who may not like Lukashenko's anti-Russian rhetoric. Secondly, in terms of foreign policy, it is a message to Russia that Lukashenko does not oppose the recent slowing down of the integration process and still wants to deepen relations with Russia.

President of Uzbekistan Visited Russia

Key Event: On June 23, 2020, during his official visit to Moscow, the Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, met with the Russian President, Vladimir Putin.



Meeting of the Presidents of Russia and Uzbekistan. Source: Web-page of the Administration of the Russian President

Event in Details: The visit of the President of Uzbekistan to Russia on June 24 coincided with the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the victory in the Great Patriotic War. The two presidents spoke about the unique strategic and alliance relations between their two countries.

Bilateral relations developed in 2016 after the death of Islam Karimov and the presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Russia's investment in Uzbekistan exceeded USD 10 billion. Last year, the trade turnover amounted to USD 6.6 billion. More than ten branches of Russian higher education institutions have been opened in Uzbekistan.

During Mirziyoyev's tenure, significant progress has been made to get closer to Russia. On May 11, prior to his visit to Moscow, the Upper House of the Supreme Assembly of Uzbekistan approved with a majority vote to become an observer state to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). A similar decision was made by the Lower House of the Supreme Assembly on April 28. After the meeting with Putin, it is very likely that Uzbekistan will become an EAEU member state.

Why the Event is Important for Russia: Russia considers Uzbekistan an important country in the Central Asian region. Tashkent's desire to become an EAEU member state and Shavkat Mirziyoyev's visit to Moscow are kinds of messages to Russia that Uzbekistan is breaking its isolationist foreign policy. For Russia, these positive messages will lead to the development of cooperation not only in the fields of economy and education but also in the political direction.

Why the Event is Important for Uzbekistan: The Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, unlike his predecessor, Islam Karimov, is eager to develop relations with Russia. Mirziyoyev's foreign policy is less isolationist and hopes to reap economic benefits by developing cooperation with Russia, especially within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union.

Latvia Bans Russian Television Channels

Key Event: On June 30, 2020, the Latvian National Electronic Media Council banned seven Russian television channels.



RT logo. Source: Wikipedia

Event in Details: "These TV programs have been banned because they are controlled and managed by the Russian propagandist, Dmitry Kiselyov," said Latvia's media watchdog, the National Electronic Media Council (NEPLP). Kiselyov has been on the EU sanctions list for his alleged role in promoting Kremlin propaganda in support of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine. The news agency listed the banned channels: RT's main English-language broadcast service, its Spanish and Arabic counterparts and the RT Documentary channel, as well as the HD versions of the programs. According to the Latvian Special Services, these are the most influential channels of the Kremlin's propaganda in the West. In addition, RT also attempted to present Latvia as a failed state.

Dmitry Kiselyov is the Director General of the international news agency Rossiya Segodnya. In 2018-2020, state funding allocated for the media holding amounted to RUB 20.4 billion.

Last year, ten other Russian TV channels were banned for systematic hate speech against Ukraine.

Why the Event is Important: During Vladimir Putin's rule, Russian television channels became an influential tool in the Kremlin's foreign policy which the Kremlin has used for propaganda purposes against the West, including pro-Western countries in the post-Soviet space. Consequently, Latvia plans to weaken Russian information influence within the country by banning the broadcasting of Russian state channels.

McDonald's in Ukraine Says "Nyet" to the Russian Language

Main Event: A move by McDonald's in Ukraine says "nyet" to the Russian language on its electronic kiosks, offering the client the ability to place an order in Ukrainian or English. The Russian language was removed from the menu.

Event in Details: McDonald's Russian-speaking customers criticized the fast-food chain. Noted Ukrainian blogger, Anatoliy Shariy, who is well-known for his strong pro-Russia stance, stated that the policy discriminates against Ukraine's Russian-speaking population. For its part, McDonald's said in a statement that the move was made in accordance with the law which establishes Ukrainian as the main language of communication in the former Soviet republic. In 2014, following Russia's annexation of Crimea, the McDonald's branch on the peninsula was closed due to the "inability to provide security for guests and staff."

Why the Event is Important: This fact is of little importance, however, a decrease in the influence of the Russian language not only on the state but also on everyday life is considered to be a weakening of Russian political influence which should lead to the expansion of the use of the Ukrainian language and intensify Ukrainian identity in Ukraine.