

# Russia: Opposition Crackdown and U.S. Policy

February 9, 2021

## Opposition Crackdown

A crackdown on anti-corruption activist Alexey Navalny and protesters supporting him has drawn increased attention to human rights abuses in Russia under President Vladimir Putin. U.S. officials and Members of Congress have condemned an August 2020 nerve agent attack on Navalny, his January 2021 imprisonment, and the suppression of pro-Navalny demonstrations. The Biden Administration and international partners are expected to respond further to Russian human rights abuses and the apparent use of a chemical weapon.

Recent developments indicate Russian authorities launched a campaign last year to silence Navalny, a one-time Moscow mayoral candidate. Navalny has demonstrated acumen in exposing government corruption and organizing anti-government actions, despite being [barred](#) from competing in elections since 2013. In August 2020, Navalny was poisoned and fell ill on a domestic flight to Moscow. His plane made an emergency landing, and Navalny was hospitalized; after public outcry, authorities allowed him to be evacuated to Germany for medical care. German officials later [cited](#) “unequivocal” evidence Navalny had been poisoned with an illicit nerve agent known as a Novichok. An investigation by independent researchers [implicated](#) several individuals linked to the Federal Security Service (FSB), Russia’s leading domestic security agency. Navalny, posing as a government official, later spoof-called an alleged operative who appeared to [provide](#) details of the attack.

Rather than seek asylum after recovering, Navalny and his wife, [Yulia Navalnaya](#), returned to Moscow, where Navalny was [detained](#) at the airport on January 17, 2021. Authorities ostensibly arrested Navalny for having missed parole check-ins, including during his hospitalization abroad. Navalny’s parole was related to a 3½-year suspended sentence he [received](#) in 2014 on embezzlement charges the European Court of Human Rights [found](#) to be “arbitrary, unfair and manifestly unreasonable.” On February 2, a Russian court [ordered](#) Navalny to be imprisoned for 32 months of his suspended sentence (the court subtracted time served during house arrest). Navalny was [imprisoned](#) several times in the past for participation in unsanctioned protests. He was [attacked](#) twice with a harmful chemical substance in 2017 and possibly [poisoned](#) another time while in prison.

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Even after his latest arrest, Navalny has continued efforts to expose corruption and undermine Putin's leadership. Navalny's team released a documentary [film](#) purporting to present evidence of corruption under Putin that has received over 100 million views online. In court, Navalny [said](#) Putin was a "thieving little man" who would go down in history as "Vladimir the Poisoner of [Underpants](#)."

Navalny's imprisonment has sparked mass demonstrations across Russia. Authorities have forcibly broken up protests and [detained thousands](#) of participants. Navalny associates are under [house arrest](#).

Together with the United States, the [European Union](#) (EU), the [Group of Seven](#) (G7), and others have condemned the crackdown. The EU [imposed](#) sanctions on six Russian officials and a research institute in response to the use of chemical weapons in the Navalny "assassination attempt" and may consider further measures. During senior EU official Josep Borrell's February 2021 visit to Moscow, Russia [expelled](#) three European diplomats for allegedly participating in pro-Navalny demonstrations. Borrell [said](#) Russian authorities were not interested in a "constructive dialogue" and that "Europe and Russia are drifting apart."

## U.S. Policy

If the U.S. government determines the Russian government was responsible for the nerve agent attack on Navalny, it may impose [sanctions](#) on Russia pursuant to the Chemical and Biological Weapons Control and Warfare Elimination Act of 1991 (22 U.S.C. §§5601 et seq.). The United States also could impose sanctions pursuant to other authorities, including the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability Act of 2012 (22 U.S.C. §5811 note).

The Trump and Biden Administrations, together with some Members of Congress, have criticized Russia's crackdown. In September 2020, then-Deputy U.S. Secretary of State Stephen Biegun [expressed](#) "grave concern" about the attack on Navalny and noted, "the use of [a] chemical weapon by Russia would be a clear violation of its obligations under the Chemical Weapons Convention." On January 17, 2021, then-Secretary of State Michael Pompeo [condemned](#) Navalny's arrest. The Trump Administration did not make a formal determination that Russia was responsible for the attack or impose sanctions in response.

President Biden [addressed](#) Navalny's poisoning in a January 26 telephone call with President Putin and [included](#) the issue in a tasking to the intelligence community for a "full assessment" of key issues in U.S.-Russia relations (together with the [SolarWinds](#) cyber breach of U.S. government agencies, interference in the 2020 presidential election, and alleged bounties to the Taliban for attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan). In a February 4 foreign policy speech, President Biden [called](#) Navalny's imprisonment "politically motivated" and said, "Russian efforts to suppress freedom of expression and peaceful assembly are a matter of deep concern to us and the international community." The State Department [indicated](#) the United States will "coordinate closely with our allies and partners to hold Russia accountable" and [called](#) on Russia to "credibly explain the use of a chemical weapon on its soil."

Many observers expect the Biden Administration to consider a firm response to various Russian malign activities. In addition to responding to Navalny's imprisonment, the Biden Administration has broached the plight of U.S. citizens imprisoned in Russia. On February 2, the State Department said the United States was "seriously concerned over the treatments of American citizens Paul Whelan and Trevor Reed." On February 3, the White House [called](#) on Russia to "swiftly release" both Americans.

On February 3, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken [announced](#) a five-year extension of the New START nuclear arms treaty with Russia. He noted, "Even as we work with Russia to advance U.S. interests, so too will we work to hold Russia to account for adversarial actions as well as its human rights abuses, in close coordination with our allies and partners." Members of Congress likely will consider additional measures in response to the Russian crackdown and assess the Administration's review of policy toward Russia.

On related issues, see CRS Report R46518, *Russia: Domestic Politics and Economy*; CRS Report R46616, *Russian Military Intelligence: Background and Issues for Congress*; and CRS In Focus IF10962, *Russia, the Skripal Poisoning, and U.S. Sanctions*.

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