

Georgian Government Is Suppressing Free Expression, PEN Says.

November 02, 2023

- By [RFE/RL's Georgian Service](#)



A report by PEN America says several initiatives spearheaded by Georgian Culture Minister Tea Tsulukiani are “aimed at overseeing and controlling Georgia’s vibrant cultural landscape.” (file photo)

The U.S.-based PEN writers' association **warned in a report** published on November 2 that the government in Georgia is clamping down on freedom of speech and cultural expression in ways that could have implications for Georgia's bid to join the European Union.

The **report** by PEN America highlighted a “concerning pattern of targeting individuals” in the cultural sphere who have criticized the government or expressed views at odds with the government’s line. It also highlighted the government’s interference in the system of selecting and appointing leaders of the country’s major cultural institutions.

According to the New York-based nonprofit, these practices are part of the ruling Georgian Dream party’s “concerted effort to suppress free expression and curb cultural independence in the country.”

“Their goal seems to be the redirection of overwhelming public support away from EU membership and toward stronger ties with Russia,” PEN America’s advocacy and Eurasia director, Polina Sadovskaya, said in a statement.

“These actions have drawn limited international attention, which is concerning, given that restraints on writers, artists, and cultural workers are regularly one of the first signs of democratic backsliding as autocrats seek to control public opinion,” she added.

The report details several initiatives spearheaded by Tea Tsulukiani, Georgia’s minister of culture, which according to PEN America are “aimed at overseeing and controlling Georgia’s vibrant cultural landscape.”



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Georgian Film, Celebrated Abroad, Under Fire At Home

Among them are alleged attempts to silence artists who are critical of the government.

One case detailed in the report is a criminal investigation launched against the artist Sandro Sulaberidze, who removed his self-portrait from a gallery wall and had painted in its place the phrase “Art is alive and independent!”

Another case mentioned in the report is that of Gaga Chkheidze, who was dismissed from his position as director of the Georgian National Film Center shortly after posting critical remarks about the government on Facebook.

The report also detailed a case of alleged government interference in the personnel policy of cultural institutions, including the National Museum of Georgia and the National Agency for Cultural Heritage Protection. As part of their “restructuring,” staff members were required to undergo interviews during which they were asked about their political allegiance.



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Fight At The Museum: The Georgian Government Takes On The Arts

Subsequently, scores of employees, including many highly qualified researchers and directors, were let go and replaced by government-appointed officials with little to no experience in managing museums or cultural institutions, the report said.

PEN America also described government interference in awarding literary awards, with the Culture Ministry requiring the inclusion of a ministry representative on literary awards juries and requiring the ministry’s approval of the other jury members.

The PEN America’s report comes as Georgia is expecting a decision on its EU membership bid.

Georgia applied for EU membership shortly after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, along with Ukraine and Moldova. While the two latter countries were awarded candidate status in June 2022, Georgia was instead given an EU “perspective” and a list of reforms it should implement.

In addition to tackling political polarization and other issues, the European Commission has recommended that Georgia address concerns about freedom of expression.

By the end of the year, the EU will decide -- based on its perception of the progress Georgia has made on those reforms -- whether to award it candidate status.

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Ansarullah consists mostly of Tajiks who are not loyal to the Tajik government. (file photo)

January 09, 2024

- By [RFE/RL's Radio Farda](#)

Iranian Singer Sentenced To Prison, Lashes For Song Criticizing Hijab Law



Mehdi Yarahi (file photo)

Singer Mehdi Yarahi has been sentenced to two years and eight months in prison and 74 lashes for a song he released critical of Iran's law requiring women to cover their heads.

Yarrah's lawyer, Zahra Minuei, said in a [post](#) on X, formerly Twitter, that the 26th branch of the Tehran Revolutionary Court handed down the sentence for "challenging the public mind and propaganda against the regime" with the release of his song, Your Head Scarf.

"Mr. Yarrah is currently free with a bail of 15 billion tomans, which was deposited by Mr. Kushan Haddad, one of his colleagues," Minuei added.

Yarrah was [arrested](#) in August 2023 and held until October, when he was released on bail. He was sentenced by the court on multiple charges and the sentences run concurrently, meaning the singer will serve one year in prison.

Your Head Scarf urges women to remove their mandatory head scarves. It was released as officials clamped down on dissent ahead of the first anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini in September 2023.

Amini died in police custody for an alleged hijab violation. Her death sparked the Women, Life, Freedom movement and nationwide unrest over the government's restrictions on women and their daily lives.

While the protests appear to be waning, resistance to the hijab, or mandatory head scarf for women, is likely to increase, analysts say, as it is seen now as a symbol of the state's repression of women and the deadly crackdown on society.

Several cinematographers and prominent public figures have also been summoned by the police or arrested, including director Hamid Porazari.

Other celebrities, including prominent actresses Afsaneh Bayegan, Fatemeh Motamed-Arya, Katayon Riahi, and Pantea Bahram, have been interrogated and faced legal action after they made public appearances without wearing the hijab to show support for the protesters.

[Read more](#)



(file photo)



(file photo)



Former Yukos chief Mikhail Khodorkovsky spent 10 years in prison in Russia before being freed in 2013. (file photo)

Updated January 09, 2024

- By [RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service](#)

Deep Freeze, Blizzards Cut Power To Ukrainian Settlements, Force Russia To Halt Drone Strikes



Rescuers with a dog work at the site of a Russian missile strike in the town of Pokrovsk, in Ukraine's Donetsk region, on January 8.

Ukraine's Energy Ministry says 1,025 settlements were without electricity on January 9 as the war-racked country grapples with a wave of unusually cold weather, snowfall, and high winds that even forced Russia to pause its relentless waves of drone and missile strikes.

The ministry **said** that blizzards and the icing of power lines had led to outages in the Dnipropetrovsk, Odesa, Mykolayiv, and Kirovohrad regions.

Live Briefing: Russia's Invasion Of Ukraine



RFE/RL's **Live Briefing** gives you all of the latest developments on Russia's full-scale invasion, Kyiv's counteroffensive, Western military aid, global reaction, and the plight of civilians. For all of RFE/RL's coverage of the war in Ukraine, [click here](#).

Nearly 29,000 consumers in 324 settlements have been left without electricity in the Dnipropetrovsk region, 268 settlements in the Odesa region, 215 in the Mykolayiv region, and 146 settlements in the Kirovohrad region.

In the Zaporizhzhya region, 59 settlements were cut off, in Kherson 14, and nine in the Chernihiv and Chernivtsi regions.

"Emergency teams in the regions affected by bad weather are working around the clock to repair the damage," the ministry said in a statement. "However, ice makes work and movement more difficult."

The forecast by Ukraine's hydrometeorological center remains bleak, with more snowfall expected in the south and southeast, and with temperatures as low as minus 21 Celsius at night and minus 12 during the day.

For the first time in weeks, Russia did not launch drone strikes on Ukraine's territory on January 9, a development that Natalia Humenyuk, the spokeswoman of the Defense Forces of Southern Ukraine, **said** was also due to the spell of unusually bad weather.

"We understand that the absence of a wave of drone attacks is a response, in a certain way, to weather conditions as well. However, the enemy continued the artillery bombardment," Humenyuk said, adding that the southern cities of Kherson and Antonivka bore the brunt of the shelling.

The lull in Russian air strikes comes a day after an unusually heavy wave of missile and drone attacks that left five people dead and wounded dozens in several Ukrainian regions on January 8.

Meanwhile, Vyacheslav Gladkov, the governor of Russia's Belgorod region bordering Ukraine, said that three people were wounded in the city of Belgorod by Ukrainian shelling. Gladkov **said** on his Telegram channel that Russian air defenses shot down 10 "air targets" late on January 8.

There was no immediate confirmation from Ukraine, but the Kremlin said the Russian military would do everything in its power to tackle the stepped-up Ukrainian shelling of Belgorod.

"Of course, our military will continue to do everything in order to minimize the danger at first and then eliminate it entirely," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

He accused the Ukrainian military of firing on civilian targets in the center of the urban hub of some 340,000 people with weapons supplied by European countries.

The Kremlin has tried to maintain a semblance of normalcy on the home front, but the recent strikes on Belgorod have brought the Ukraine conflict closer to home for Russians.

In recent weeks, the Belgorod region has been repeatedly targeted by Ukrainian forces. A strike late last month reportedly killed 25 civilians, prompting city officials to evacuate hundreds and extend a closure of schools.

With reporting by AFP and Reuters

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January 09, 2024

- By [RFE/RL](#)

U.S. Watchdog Tells Congress No 'Specific' Controls In Place For Afghan Assistance



A Taliban fighter stands guard as women wait to receive food rations distributed by a humanitarian aid group in Kabul.

The U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) says there are no specific controls in place to ensure funds headed to the war-torn country are not diverted to or misused by the Taliban militants who seized control amid the departure of international troops in August 2021.

In a response to a Congressional request for a report on the Switzerland-based Afghan Fund, SIGAR [said](#) in a letter late on January 8 that many questions remain about the situation and its \$3.5 billion in funds.

SIGAR said the purpose of the Afghan Fund was to "receive, protect, preserve, and disburse" the assets it holds through Afghanistan's central bank "for the benefit of the Afghan people."

Decisions regarding the disbursement of funds require a unanimous vote of the board of trustees, it added, noting that more than a year after being created, the fund had made no disbursements "for activities intended to benefit the Afghan people."

"Although the fund's unanimous vote requirement could help prevent the fund from engaging in risky activity, there are currently no controls in place that specifically address the issue of Taliban diversion," SIGAR said.

The de facto Taliban government remains largely unrecognized by the international community and has been accused of widespread human rights abuses, particularly against women and girls. It has

barred women from working for assistance organizations and has restricted the ability of such organizations to work in the education sector.

A SIGAR quarterly report in October 2023 warned the "the Taliban have effectively infiltrated and influenced most UN-managed assistance programming," raising fears among U.S. lawmakers that the Afghan Fund could suffer a similar fate.

SIGAR said in its letter to Congress that the U.S. Treasury and the State Department will not support transferring the funds back to the central bank, the Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB), in Kabul until it "implements adequate anti-money laundering and countering-terrorist-financing controls."

"The DAB must also demonstrate its independence from political influence and interference, submit to monitoring by a 'reputable' third party, and undergo a third-party needs assessment," it added.

Amid its international isolation because of the Taliban rulers and a severe drought, Afghanistan is teetering on the brink of a humanitarian crisis, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said in a report on January 8.

"An estimated 23.7 million people -- more than half of Afghanistan's population -- will require humanitarian assistance to survive in 2024 as the country continues to reel from decades of war and grapple with climate-induced crises, recurrent natural disasters, entrenched poverty, and barriers to women's participation in public life," the [report](#) said.

It added that more than \$3 billion in "life-saving assistance" will be required in 2024 to avert the crisis.

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Updated January 09, 2024

- By [RFE/RL](#)

American Detained In Russia On Drug Charges



Robert Romanov Woodland speaks to a journalist during an interview with the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper in Moscow in 2020.

A Russian court has sent U.S. citizen Robert Romanov Woodland to pretrial detention for two months on drug-possession charges that could see him imprisoned for up to two decades.

The Ostankino district court in Moscow ruled on January 9 that Woodland must stay in pretrial detention until at least March 5. It said the charges were related to the illegal acquisition or possession of drugs. No further details were provided.

The charges come amid accusations from Washington that U.S. nationals are being detained to be used by Moscow as bargaining chips in exchange for Russians jailed in the United States.

A [Facebook](#) account in the name of Robert Woodland indicated that he had been working as an English teacher in Russia and lived outside Moscow.

The Russian news site Mash [said](#) Woodland, 32, was detained on January 5.

It noted that a man named Robert Woodland appeared on a state television program in 2020, where he met his Russian mother. Woodland said he was adopted in 1993 by Americans from an orphanage in Russia's Perm region.

Woodland's arrest comes almost three months after a U.S.-Russian dual citizen, Prague-based U.S. journalist Alsu Kurmasheva, who has worked for RFE/RL's Tatar-Bashkir Service for some 25 years, was arrested in Russia's Tatarstan region.



[SEE ALSO:](#)

[How The Russian State Ramped Up The Suppression Of Dissent In 2023: 'It Worked In The Soviet Union, And It Works Now'](#)

Kurmasheva was attending to a family emergency in Kazan, the regional capital, when she was briefly detained while waiting for her return flight on June 2, 2023, at the airport, where both of her passports and phone were confiscated.

After five months spent waiting for a decision in her case, Kurmasheva was fined 10,000 rubles (\$110) for failing to register her U.S. passport with Russian authorities.

While waiting for the return of her travel documents, Kurmasheva was detained again on October 18 and this time charged with failing to register as a "foreign agent," a legal designation Russia has used since 2012 to label and punish critics of government policies.

If convicted, Kurmasheva may face up to five years in prison.



[SEE ALSO:](#)

[EU Calls On Russia To 'Immediately Release' RFE/RL Journalist Alsu Kurmasheva](#)

In March last year, another U.S. citizen, Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, was arrested in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg for spying -- a charge he and the newspaper vehemently deny.

If convicted, Gershkovich may face up to 20 years in prison.

In 2018, Russia arrested a former U.S. Marine, Michigan-based corporate security executive Paul Whelan, who holds U.S., British, Canadian, and Irish citizenship, claiming that he was caught with a flash drive containing classified information.

In 2020, a Russian court sentenced Whelan to 16 years in prison on espionage charge, which he and the U.S. government have denied.

Whelan, who was arrested while visiting Moscow for a friend's wedding, has insisted that he was set up in a sting operation and had thought the drive, given to him by a Russian acquaintance,

contained vacation photos.

The detentions of U.S. citizens in Russia come as relations between Moscow and Washington are at their lowest point since the end of the Cold War over the Kremlin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

More than 30 RFE/RL journalists have been listed individually as "foreign agents" by the Russian Justice Ministry.

RFE/RL says the "foreign agent" law amounts to political censorship meant to prevent journalists from performing their professional duties and is challenging the moves in Russian courts and at the European Court of Human Rights.

With reporting by TASS, Interfax, and Reuters

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Updated January 09, 2024

- By [RFE/RL's Balkan Service](#)

Bosnian Serbs Mark Unconstitutional 'National Day' As U.S. Urges Investigation



Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik waves to people during parade celebrations to mark Republika Srpska's national holiday in Banja Luka on January 9, 2022.

Bosnia-Herzegovina's Serb-dominated entity, Republika Srpska, has opened the celebration of its unconstitutional "national day" as the United States called for an investigation into the event amid international warnings about the secessionist policies of the entity's leader, Milorad Dodik.

January 9 marks the date in 1992 when Bosnian Serbs, who opposed an independent Bosnia after the breakup of Yugoslavia, declared their separate state, triggering an interethnic war that claimed more than 100,000 lives and was finally stopped by the U.S.-brokered Dayton accords in late 1995.

Under the Dayton accords, Bosnia has been administered by a central government under a Bosniak and Croat federation and a mostly Serb-populated entity known as Republika Srpska.

January 9 is **celebrated** as a national day in the Bosnian entity, although the Constitutional Court of Bosnia has twice declared the holiday unconstitutional.

The U.S. Embassy in Bosnia warned in a statement on January 9 that the move was in violation of both Bosnia's constitution and the Dayton agreement and urged Bosnia's authorities to open an investigation.

"The United States' expectation is that the relevant law enforcement and judicial authorities will investigate any violations of law that occur related to the celebration of the Day of the Republika Srpska on January 9," the **statement** said.

To reinforce Washington's backing for Bosnia's territorial integrity, two U.S. F-16 warplanes and a tanker aircraft flew over the country on January 8.



[SEE ALSO:](#)

U.S. Warplanes Conduct Training Exercise Over Bosnia On Eve Of Banned Bosnian Serb Day

The banned holiday has been marked in the Serbian entity's capital, Banja Luka, with parades and marches by armed police.

Opening the celebrations, Dodik announced he was awarding Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban with the highest decoration of the Serbian entity.

"The prime minister of Hungary, Viktor Orban, has accepted the highest award of the Republika Srpska. It is the pride of Republika Srpska to show its gratitude to the man who is willing to consider and respect us as a political reality," Dodik **said**. "We have a friend like never before."

Over the past two years, Dodik, who has close relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin, has repeatedly attempted to erode the central Bosnian government's authority and establish parallel institutions to further his longtime threats to divide the country permanently.

Orban has also been a close friend of Putin's and has been at odds with the rest of the EU, voicing his opposition to sanctions against Moscow due to its invasion of Ukraine.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) warned in a statement last week that the January 9 celebration "directly contravenes the constitutions of both Bosnia-Herzegovina and of Republika Srpska."

The OSCE also said that the celebration amounted to "an act of discrimination."

The event in Banja Luka will conclude with a military parade scheduled for 5 p.m.

Members of Russia's Night Wolves motorcycle club, which is close to Putin, are expected to again take part in the parade.

Members of the Night Wolves in recent years have often visited Republika Srpska, where they also have domestic representatives, on religious and secular holidays.

With reporting by AFP

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German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (file photo)



Riot police block a street during an opposition rally in Minsk in September 2020.



Ales Sabaleuski (file photo)



Workers of the West Oil Software company rally at the Zhetibai oil field in the Manghystau region on December 15.

Updated January 08, 2024

- By [RFE/RL's Russian Service](#)

Russian Railways Says Freight Train Derails On Transbaikal Railroad



(file photo)

Fourteen wagons of a freight train derailed on the Transbaikal railway, Russian Railways said on January 8. Tracks were damaged and passenger traffic along the Moscow-to-Vladivostok route was affected, but no injuries were reported and there was no environmental threat, Russian Railways said on Telegram. The derailment occurred on a section of track between Aleur and Bushuley in southeastern Russia. “We are doing everything possible to eliminate the consequences of the derailment and resume traffic in this area,” the railway said. The cause of the derailment is unknown. The railway initially said 27 freight wagons derailed. A Telegram channel linked to the

Russian government said earlier that an explosion at the San-Donato railway station near the Urals city of Nizhny Tagil disrupted train traffic. Baza and another Telegram channel, Kanal 112, reported that an explosive device detonated on the tracks in the railway station, adding that a second explosive device that failed to detonate was discovered nearby. *To read the original story by RFE/RL's Russian Service, [click here](#).*

[Read more](#)

January 08, 2024

- By [RFE/RL's Radio Azadi](#)
- [RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal](#)

Pakistani Islamist Leader Attempts To Help Reset Ties With Afghan Taliban



JUI leader Maulana Fazlur Rehman (right) visits Afghan diplomats in Peshawar, Pakistan on December 16, where he was invited to visit Kabul.

A senior Pakistani Islamist politician has met top Taliban leaders in Afghanistan's capital, Kabul, in an attempt to revive ties between the two neighbors.

The January 8 meeting involving Maulana Fazlur Rehman, leader of the Jamiat Ulema-e Islam Pakistan (JUI) political party, hoped to improve ties marred by a violent campaign by the Pakistani Taliban allied with the Afghan Taliban and the ongoing forced expulsion of more than 1 million Afghans by Islamabad.

Mullah Mohammad Hassan Akhund, the Taliban-led government's prime minister, reiterated that officials want smooth relations -- strained due to the forced expulsion of Afghan refugees from Pakistan -- with the country's neighbors.

Islamabad has accused the Taliban government of giving shelter to militants of the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), also known as the Pakistani Taliban, or other groups. Kabul denies the accusations.

"We will not allow anyone to [create problems] from our territory," he was [quoted](#) as saying by a Taliban statement after the meeting.

In recent months, Pakistan has taken steps to expel 1.7 million undocumented Afghans as part of a policy announced in October to repatriate "illegal foreigners" living on its soil.

The situation has led to chaotic scenes at some border crossings as returnees are funneled back into Afghanistan, where international aid groups are already struggling to provide humanitarian assistance to millions of people displaced by insecurity and a recent spate of earthquakes and perennial drought.



[SEE ALSO:](#)

Afghan Returnees Face Harsh Winter Of Discontent

Amir Khan Muttaqi, the Taliban's foreign minister, highlighted the plight of Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the losses Afghan traders endure because of frequent border closures and stranded imports in Pakistani ports.

"The trade and economic exchange between the two countries should not be sacrificed for political ends," he was quoted as saying in the Taliban statement.

Rehman agreed with the Taliban's complaints about the mistreatment of Afghans in Pakistan.

"We see this kind of attitude as a cause of the current problems between the two countries," he **said** in a statement issued by the JUI. "My visit aims to remove the misunderstanding between the two countries."

Rehman is visiting Kabul after the Taliban invited him last month.

Before leaving on the trip, Rehman told RFE/RL's Radio Mashaal that it was endorsed by Islamabad, where senior government officials briefed him on the current state of relations with the Taliban government.

He said that he would also meet the Taliban's supreme leader, Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada, who rarely meets foreign diplomats and political leaders.

"We will use our relations with the Taliban for the benefit of both countries," he **said**.

Rehman's JUI has had close relations with the Taliban since its emergence in southern Afghanistan nearly three decades ago. Many Taliban leaders were educated in madrasahs run by former lawmakers and other JUI leaders.

But it is unclear how far his visit will go to quell tensions between Islamabad and Kabul.

For more than a year, the longtime allies have fallen out over the Taliban's alleged support for the TTP. Islamabad blames the group for the rising attacks that have killed more than 2,000 people since the Taliban's return to power in August 2021.

Underscoring the challenges ahead, the TTP claimed responsibility for a **bomb attack** on a police vehicle on January 8.

At least five police officers were killed and 22 injured in an attack in the district of Bajaur on the Afghan border in the northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province.

The police were guarding a polio-vaccination team.

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January 08, 2024

- By [RFE/RL's Russian Service](#)

Jailed Russian Rapper Summoned To Recruitment Center



Vacio (center) appears in court in Moscow on December 22.

Russian rapper Vacio, who is serving a second jail term for taking part in a party at a Moscow nightclub last month that sparked controversy, has been summoned to a military recruitment center.

A member of the Public Monitoring Commission of Moscow, Aleksei Lobarev, **said** on January 8 that he visited Vacio, whose real name is Nikolai Vasilyev, in a Moscow jail a day earlier, adding that the rapper had told him that he had been officially summoned to show up at a military recruitment center this week.

However, he won't be able to do so, as he is serving a 10-day jail term on a hooliganism charge.

Vacio, who attended an "almost naked party" at the Mutabor night club on December 20-21 with just a sock on his genitals, was the only person sent to jail, on a hooliganism charge, for attending the party.

After serving his first term, 15 days, last week, Vacio said he was taken to a military recruitment center, where he was handed a written order to show up on January 9.

However, after bringing him to the recruitment center, police took him to a local station for "a preventive talk," and a Moscow court again sentenced Vacio to 10 days in jail for hooliganism.

It is not clear why Vacio was summoned to the military recruitment center. He is legally unfit to serve in the armed forces due to an unspecified medical condition.

Pictures and videos taken at the scandalous party that was attended by many celebrities appeared online and caused outcry among pro-Kremlin activists and lawmakers in late December.



SEE ALSO:

Organizer, Celebrities Who Attended 'Almost Naked' Party In Moscow Rush To Apologize Amid Backlash

The party's organizer, blogger Anastasia Ivleyeva and popular singers, such as Filipp Kirkorov, Anna Asti, Eurovision song contest winner Dima Bilan, Lolita Milyavskaya, journalist Ksenia Sobchak, and others offered public apologies amid a wave of official criticism.

A court in Moscow did not charge Ivleyeva but ruled that the party had "propagated nontraditional sexual relations." Propagating gay relations is a crime in Russia.

However, the Investigative Committee launched a preliminary investigation into possible tax evasion by Ivleyeva.

Russia's largest mobile network operator, MTS, the Tinkoff Bank, the VK social network, as well as the TNT and NTV television channels canceled advertising contracts with Ivleyeva and other celebrities who attended the party.

Also, the concerts of several attending entertainers as well as their participation in special television programs on New Year's Eve were canceled.

Over the weekend, in an apparent way to clear himself from possible accusations or even charges, the owner of the Mutabor night club that hosted the party, Mikhail Danilov, publicly handed to the Russian Orthodox Church what he called a piece of the relics of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker, which, according to Danilov, he bought in Vatican City last year.

The wave of apologies that participants rushed to issue prompted heated debate online, where some Russians compared them with the era of Soviet dictator Josef Stalin, during which many resorted to repenting for deeds real or imaginary in order to try and save their lives amid mass purges.

With reporting by Moskovsky komsomolets
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The website was launched in May 2022.



(file photo)



Pakistani ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif addresses supporters during an event held to welcome him in Lahore in October 2023.

January 08, 2024

- By [RFE/RL's Tajik Service](#)

Germany Says Tajik Held On Terrorism Charge To Be Deported To Austria



A police car drives in front of the Cologne Cathedral last month.

Police in the German city of Cologne say a Tajik national detained in late December on suspicion of plotting a terrorist attack on Cologne Cathedral is wanted in Austria and will be sent there to face charges.

According to the police, the 30-year-old Tajik man will be deported to Austria, where he is **suspected** of plotting a terrorist attack targeting St. Stephen's Cathedral and the Prater park, a popular area for families, in the Austrian capital, Vienna.

Police arrested the man, whom some reports identified as Muhammadrajab B., in the town of Wesel, about 100 kilometers north of Cologne, after detaining five people and searching a residence there.

One of the five arrested men was identified as a 25-year-old Tajik man, a resident of the German city of Norvenich.

Muhammadrajab B. is suspected of having links to the Islamic State-Khorasan extremist group.

On December 31, police in the western city of Bochum arrested a 41-year old man with German and Turkish citizenship on suspicion of involvement in the plot to attack the Cologne Cathedral. The next day, police in Bochum detained three men of Tajik and Uzbek origin, who were later released on court orders.

German media, citing law enforcement, said a car was planned to be used in an attack near the cathedral.

German media also identified a Central Asian man, Murat Tashbekovich I., who was arrested in Austria on suspicion of involvement in a plot to attack the Cologne Cathedral. Police say he met with Muhammadrajab B. in the German city of Sankt Wendel in late November.

Authorities in Cologne and Vienna have beefed up security around Cologne Cathedral and St. Stephen's Cathedral since late December.

Tajik authorities have yet to comment on the reports.

With reporting by dpa and Bild

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Salmon Jumaboi

January 08, 2024

• By [RFE/RL's Balkan Service](#)

U.S. Warplanes Conduct Training Exercise Over Bosnia On Eve Of Banned Bosnian Serb Day



Two U.S. F-16 warplanes and a tanker aircraft flew over Bosnia-Herzegovina on January 8 as part of a military exercise to demonstrate Washington's backing for the Balkan country's territorial integrity in the face of increasingly secessionist policies of Bosnian Serb leader Milorad Dodik.

The U.S. Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons and a KC-135 Stratotanker flew as part of joint air-to-ground training involving U.S. and Bosnian forces.

The flyovers [took place](#) over the regions of the eastern town of Tuzla and northern Brcko, according to a [statement](#) from the U.S. Embassy in Sarajevo.

But Bosnian media reported that the thunderous sound of jets could be heard in Banja Luka, the main city in Republika Srpska, during a ceremonial gathering on the eve of Republika Srpska Day.

January 9 is celebrated as Republika Srpska Day in the Bosnian Serb entity, although the Constitutional Court of Bosnia has twice declared the holiday unconstitutional.

The day marks the anniversary of the region's 1992 declaration of independence, which ignited the 1992-95 Bosnian War. In years past, the banned holiday has been marked in Banja Luka by parades and marches by armed police.

The embassy statement said the training exercise on January 8 was "an example of advanced military-to-military cooperation that contributes to peace and security in the Western Balkans as well as demonstrates the United States' commitment to ensuring the territorial integrity of [Bosnia-Herzegovina] in the face of anti-Dayton and secessionist activity."

The statement added that the United States has underscored that the Bosnian Constitution "provides no right of secession, and it will act if anyone tries to change this basic element" of the U.S.-brokered Dayton agreement that ended the war in 1995.

Dodik has defied U.S. and British sanctions imposed over his attempts to erode central Bosnian authority and establish parallel institutions to further his longtime threats to divide the country.

The training emphasized coordination between joint terminal attack controllers from U.S. Army Special Forces and the armed forces of Bosnia. It was part of efforts by U.S. forces to exchange tactics, techniques, and procedures with the Bosnian Air Force, the embassy said. The KC-135 Stratotanker provided aerial refueling to the F-16s.

According to data from the flight tracking website Flightradar24, the KC-135 Stratotanker flew from a base in Britain and made several circles over Bosnia in the Banja Luka area between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. local time. The flight paths of the F-16 fighter jets are not available on Flightradar24.

[Read more](#)



A Russian Su-34 fighter bomber (file photo)



Artyom Burlov holds a placard reading: "Enough Lying, Stealing, And Warring."

January 08, 2024

- By [RFE/RL's Russian Service](#)

Three Officers Of Russia's Federal Security Service Arrested On Corruption Charges

Three officers of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) have been arrested on corruption charges related to a 5 billion ruble (\$55 million) bribery case, Russia's TASS news agency reported on January 8. Officer Aleksandr Ushakov was placed in a detention center and charged with organizing a criminal group using his official powers. Two other officers, Aleksei Tsaryov and Sergei Manyshkin, who agreed to cooperate with investigators, are under house arrest. All three served in the FSB's anti-corruption department. *To read the original story by RFE/RL's Russian Service, [click here](#).*

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