



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Europe; Russia

September 29:

Is the Kremlin playing fair with the families of slain soldiers? The answer, Meduza reports, is "no." According to the Estonian news portal, the families of Russian servicemen killed in action in various theaters often find it difficult to claim entitlements owed to them by the Russian state as a result of legal sleight of hand on the part of government ministries. The problem stems from the terminology used in official documents surrounding the demise of the soldiers in question. Those forms use the term "umer" (died) rather than "pogib" (was killed) - a difference that has allowed the Russian state to deny requests for compensation by soldiers' families on account that the deceased was not killed in action.

The problem is pervasive. The news website cites nearly fifty cases over the past several years where the relatives of slain soldiers were forced to sue the state after their claims were denied. "The reason for the litigation was always the same: verbal discrepancies - usually between the words 'dead' and 'killed,' or between the phrases 'during military service' and 'in the line of military service.'"

October 1:

Russia is helping the Hermit Kingdom access the outside world. Writing in the influential policy portal *38North*, Martyn Williams of Johns Hopkins University notes that Russian telecom company TransTeleCom (TTK) appears to have waded into the North Korean telecom space, providing a new internet connection to the DPRK amid U.S. efforts to isolate the Kim regime. The development is significant; "Until now, Internet users in North Korea and those outside accessing North Korean websites were all funneled along the same route connecting North Korean ISP Star JV and the global Internet: A China Unicom link that has been in operation since 2010," Williams notes.

October 2:

The *New York Times* has provided new details on the nature and scope of Russia-linked social media ads meant to exert influence in the U.S. ahead of the 2016 presidential election. According to the *Times*, the St. Petersburg-based "troll factory" known as the Internet Research Agency is believed to have been responsible for most of this content, which featured pro-Kremlin propaganda and "fake" news items that were distributed on various social media sites. On Facebook alone, 10 million people are believed to have been exposed to 3,000 of these ads, which appeared on 470 separate Facebook pages. Officials at Twitter have likewise discovered around 200 Russian-linked accounts. Facebook, Twitter and Google are all now cooperating with U.S. government efforts to understand the extent and dynamics of the meddling, in addition to launching their own internal investigations into the phenomenon.

Russia has deployed a new kind of combatant in Syria. Writing in *War on the Rocks*, Russia specialist Mark Galeotti notes that units of the "voennaya politsiya" (military police) are now taking part in active combat operations in the Syrian theater. Approximately 1,200 Russian military policemen have been deployed to Syria to date, Galeotti estimates, marking an expansion of Russia's military efforts there.

Units of the "voennaya politsiya" were previously deployed in Chechnya with the purpose of facilitating military operations and winning over "hearts and minds" in the restive Russian republic via aid distribution efforts. However, the military police's current role in Syria appears to have a different objective: to improve domestic perceptions in Russia of what has become an increasingly unpopular military engagement in Syria. "The presence and activities of the military police have been hyped heavily for domestic consumption, not just playing to the general militarist and nationalist agenda of the state-controlled media but also suggesting that Russia's role is both humanitarian and relatively casualty-free," notes Galeotti.

October 3:

General Ben Hodges, the Commander of U.S. ground forces in Europe, has estimated that "more than 40,000" troops participated in Russia's recent Zapad 2017 war games with Belarus. According to the Agence France Presse, Hodges has outlined that the exercises were split into smaller drills to circumvent regulations that require international observers if more than 13,000 troops are involved. The Russian defense ministry officially reports that 12,700 troops participated in "strictly defensive" exercises, and NATO was invited to observe on designated visitors' days. Without further elaborating, Hodges added that Zapad 2017 involved "a display of Russia's 'powerful, sophisticated' electronic warfare techniques."