



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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October 25:

Russia's government is moving to strengthen its military control over the Crimean Peninsula. According to Itar-TASS, Russia's National Guard - the sprawling umbrella security service set up by President Vladimir Putin last spring - will soon form a "naval brigade" tasked with providing security for the bridge now under construction across the Kerch Strait. The bridge, once it is inaugurated next winter, will become the principal transit between Russia's newest holding and the Russian mainland, and as such holds enormous strategic value for the Kremlin. "To solve the tasks assigned to [the National Guard] to ensure the safety of the bridge across the Kerch Strait in the newly-created Southern District of the troops, it is necessary to form a new structure - a naval brigade," Viktor Zolotov, the Commander of the National Guard, has confirmed.

Russian media firms and broadcast outlets have been targeted by a new computer virus, RBK reports. The malware, dubbed "Bad Rabbit," is apparently coded in such a way as to make its detection difficult by traditional anti-virus software suites. "Hundreds" of attacks utilizing "Bad Rabbit" are said to have taken place over the past days in a variety of countries (including Ukraine and China). But Russia appears to have been the main target of the cyber attack, accounting for 65% of total incidents. Among the entities that have been targeted by the malware to date are news agency Interfax and web portal Fontanka.ru.

Is Russia arming the Taliban? For weeks, rumors have swirled that the Kremlin has quietly been providing war materiel to Afghanistan's ousted Islamist movement, thereby strengthening it in its fight against the government of Ashraf Ghani in Kabul. NATO officials, however, aren't certain that this is the case. "I don't have and I haven't seen any hard evidence on the delivery of weapons from the Russians to the Taliban," Czech Gen. Petr Pavel, the head of NATO's military committee, has told reporters in comments carried by *The Hill*. However, Pavel noted, there are indeed signs that Moscow is assisting the movement at least indirectly - in particular, intelligence reports "of Russia providing fuel to some companies that are then selling this fuel to the Taliban."

In response to the quickening pace of attacks targeting independent journalists in Russia, at least one media outlet is looking to arm its employees. *Radio Svoboda* reports that the management of the *Novaya Gazeta* newspaper is seeking to provide weapons to its employees for self-defense. In comments on *Ekho Moskvy* radio (one of whose employees was recently the victim of such violence), *Novaya Gazeta* editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov confirmed his intention to "arm" the paper's workers - and that he plans to sign a contract with Russia's Ministry of Internal Affairs to train the publication's employees in the use of firearms and obtain the requisite permits for them.

October 26:

The Kremlin could soon have even more freedom to target organizations that it views as "undesirable." *Current Time* reports that the State Duma has passed the first reading of a new bill that would permit the Kremlin to block the websites of such groups without the need to secure a court order. The designation of "undesirable" is a concrete legal category that currently encompasses eleven different organizations, including the National Endowment for Democracy, the US-Russia Foundation for Economic and Legal Development, the Open Society Institute and the UK-based Open Russia Movement. If passed, the new legislative measure - which has been sponsored by the Communist Party and the "A Just Russia" faction - would grant Russian authorities wide latitude to shut down the web presence of such organizations without resorting to legal procedures that are deemed by many in the Russian government as too cumbersome.

Russia's recent "Zapad" military exercises, which took place from September 14-20, involved sophisticated electronic warfare techniques that have left NATO officials concerned. According to NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg, "at least two allies" of the Alliance reported having parts of their telecommunications infrastructure jammed during the drills. "Phone services in Latvia, Norway and Sweden's Oeland islands were reported to have been shut down for a few hours" during the exercises, the Associated Press reports, and suspicions abound that the jamming was intentional, rather than incidental. Stoltenberg is now pressing for greater military transparency from Russia during its wargames "to make sure there are no miscalculations, misunderstandings, because these kinds of activities can have serious effects."

October 27:

Just how many Russian soldiers have died in Syria has long been a closely-guarded secret by the Kremlin, and for good reason. But now, fresh disclosures have shed new light on the mounting death toll in Russia's two-year old military adventure in the Middle East. *The Moscow Times* reports that an official death certificate recently issued by the Russian embassy in Syria (subsequently obtained by the Reuters news agency) identifies the deceased soldier in question as the 131st Russian combat death in the Syrian theater since the start of this year. That figure, the *Times* notes, is more than double the entire official casualty count tallied by the Kremlin since the start of Russian combat operations in support of the Assad regime in September of 2015.