



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Afghanistan; Africa; Middle East; Russia

RUSSIA'S EXPANDING ADVENTURISM SPURS DOMESTIC DEBATE

The Kremlin's deepening involvement in North Africa, where Moscow has begun investing in a military presence in Libya, is drawing discussion - and ire - among the country's elites. "At a time when Russians are increasingly focused on their domestic affairs instead of foreign policy and when many believe that Moscow is overextended abroad, Vladimir Putin has apparently launched a new Russian military mission in Libya, sparking a sharp debate about why he has chosen to do so especially in the current climate," notes Russia expert Paul Goble in his *Window on Eurasia* blog. The discussion, which has percolated in Russia's blogosphere and expert forums, "has gone far beyond the question of Russia's involvement in Libya to queries about what Russia is doing across Africa... and its implications for Russia itself."

Some Russian experts have begun drawing parallels between the Kremlin's current adventurism and "the overextension that destroyed the USSR." Others, meanwhile, have insisted that "the campaign will be self-financing." The debate, Goble points out, "is a reminder that instead of seeing Putin's adventures abroad as an assertion of Russia's great power claims, Russians today are assessing them in terms of what they cost in terms of cutbacks at home, something ever fewer of them appear willing to tolerate even from Putin." (*Window on Eurasia*, October 11, 2018)

EXPANDING THE RUSSIAN SURVEILLANCE STATE

Recent developments in a key international forum may signal Moscow's plans to tighten governmental control of cyberspace. After a high-level counterterrorism working group of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization voted to establish a secure communications channel among its member states, First Deputy Director of the Federal Security Service (FSB) Sergei Smirnov justified the decision as a way of fighting terrorism and leveraging state resources to protect information security. The channel complements concurrent Russian projects to stand up a separate Internet domain for the BRICS nations and create an internal "backup" network that can be disconnected from the full Internet and used in a crisis. (*Defense One*, October 22, 2018)

A RENEWED FOCUS ON FOREIGN NGOS

Russian lawmakers are brandishing their authority to block foreign interference in the country's elections. The State Duma has drafted a new multi-party bill that first defines election interference as actions creating obstacles in the electoral process, and then authorizes federal officials to label foreign organizations engaging in these actions as "undesirable." This classification renders illegal all organizations that fall under its umbrella and permits criminal charges against Russians who choose to work for them. Fifteen organizations, include the National Endowment for Democracy and the German Marshall Fund, have been branded "undesirables" since 2015. (*Meduza*, October 23, 2018)

RUSSIA PLANTS A FLAG ON THE GOLAN HEIGHTS

Since September 2015, when it formally intervened in the Syrian civil war in support of the Assad regime, Russia has manifested a growing strategic footprint in Syria and the broader Levant. That presence is now being formalized in various ways, including through the commencement of joint patrols between the Russian military and United Nations peacekeeping forces along the Israeli-Syrian border. The move marks a significant evolution of Russia's role as a guarantor for both Israeli and international forces. "The Russian military police have been patrolling the entire demilitarized zone for a long time, but the joint patrol to the south of the Quneitra crossing took place for the first time today," Lt. Gen. Sergei Kuralenko, the Deputy Commander of Russian forces in Syria, told reporters on October 26th. "Today, the Russian military police are ensuring the safety of the UN team on the mission." (Itar-TASS, October 26, 2018)

MOSCOW PLANS A SEPARATE PEACE FOR AFGHANISTAN

Russia is positioning itself as a peacemaker in Afghanistan. In a surprising move that is said to have angered Afghan government officials, the Kremlin has directly invited a group of senior Afghan politicians to Moscow for talks with the Taliban. The direct invitations, which were issued over the past couple of months, effectively bypass the government of President Ashraf Ghani, undercutting its authority on the critical issue of negotiating with the ousted Islamist movement.

The Russian effort follows on the heels of an earlier, failed attempt to convene a multilateral conference on Afghanistan back in August. That initiative foundered when key players - including the United States and the Ghani government - refused to attend, arguing that any such talks should be led by Kabul. That, in turn, appears to have led the Kremlin to try a different, and more direct, approach. (*The Moscow Times*, November 2, 2018)