



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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Related Categories: Economic Sanctions; Energy Security; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Caucasus; Central Asia; Iran; Russia; Ukraine

A HELPING FINANCIAL HAND FOR IRAN

In the face of mounting sanctions pressure against Iran on the part of the United States, Moscow is throwing an economic lifeline to its longtime strategic partner. The government of Russian President Vladimir Putin has reportedly ratified a new free trade agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union, which it leads, and the Islamic Republic. The agreement, originally concluded in May 2018, "creates conditions for boosting the development of trade and economic cooperation between countries through the liberalization of the rules of their mutual trade," writes the Itar-TASS news agency. As such, it provides a measure of added financial protection against external pressure to the Iranian regime, which is not a member of the World Trade Organization. (Itar-TASS, November 28, 2018)

NEW SIGNS OF RUSSIAN SICKNESS...

Russia leads the world in new cases of HIV, an international study has found. The report, jointly compiled by the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control and the World Health Organization (WHO), documents that the Russian Federation, along with Ukraine and Belarus, currently chart the highest number of new HIV cases (72.2 per 100,000 citizens) of any European countries. According to the report, Russia and Ukraine jointly account for three-quarters of all new HIV infections documented in Europe last year.

Moreover, according to the study's findings, Russia's HIV crisis is accelerating. As the ECDP/WHO data lays out, while virtually every country in the defined "European region," encompassing 53 countries and a population of nearly 900 million, has seen a marked decline in HIV infection rates in recent years, those of Russia have actually trended in the opposite direction. New HIV infections in Russia, the data shows, have soared from over 60,000 documented cases in 2010 to nearly 105,000 in 2017. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 29, 2018)

...BREED DENIALS IN MOSCOW

For its part, Russia has rejected the WHO's latest findings. In a public statement, Russian Health Minister Veronika Skvortsova has said that the true state of number of new HIV diagnoses in Russia was 85,802, and not 104,000 as the new WHO report documents. Moreover, according to Russian officials, the WHO numbers are "distorted" because Russia tests more of its population for HIV than do its European counterparts. In a joint statement, Russia's Health Ministry and the country's consumer protection agency, ROSPOTREBNADZOR, argued that nearly a third of all Russians are regularly tested for HIV every year - and that "[i]f the same number of people as in the Russian Federation were tested [in European countries], the level of the illness' spread in some European countries would be higher than in Russia." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 30, 2018)

PUTIN'S CASPIAN POWER PLAY

The Kremlin is laying the groundwork for an expansion of its power and influence over the Caspian, a leading authority on Russian politics and strategy has warned. "Moscow is moving quickly not just to be an important littoral state on the Caspian but to be the paramount power from north to south much as the Soviet Union was until its collapse in 1991," writes Paul Goble in his *Window on Eurasia* blog.

The government of Vladimir Putin is doing so in two principal ways, Goble posits. The first is by pressuring regional states into accepting a new legal delimitation of the Caspian - "one that specifies the central Central Caspian is for the free use of all the littoral states and where Russia's Caspian Flotilla is overwhelmingly dominant." The second is that "the Russian military has vetoed plans to sell to Azerbaijan batteries of shore rockets because of concerns such weapons systems could be used against the ships of other nations, including Russia."

All of this, Goble argues, "suggests that the recent build up of Russia's Caspian Flotilla, including the shift of its home base from Astrakhan farther south to Kaspiysk in Daghestan and the expansion of marine units that could be deployed against oil platforms or targets on land is part of a general Moscow plan to ensure that the Caspian will once again be a Russian lake." (*Window on Eurasia*, December 5, 2018)