



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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PAPERING OVER STALIN'S REPRESSION

A Moscow court has rejected a second appeal in a major suit against the head of Russia's chief security service, dealing a symbolic death blow in a year-long battle against revisionist history. Last year, Federal Security Service (FSB) Chief Alexander Bortnikov gave a controversial interview in which he appeared to excuse the Stalinist purges that killed 30 million Russians. In the ensuing public outcry, Igor Stepanov – a former investigator for the General Prosecutor's Office whose family lost at least 20 members to the gulags – sued Bortnikov for his claims and demanded a chance to respond with an interview of his own. Stepanov's attorney condemned the latest ruling as a sign that the Kremlin was whitewashing the country's past political repression. (*The Moscow Times*, December 24, 2018)

GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT STATISTICS

Months of controversy over the poor quality of data collection and analysis have prompted a major change at Russia's government statistics agency. On December 24th, Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev formally dismissed ROSSTAT director Alexander Surinov, replacing him with Pavel Malkov, who previously served as the director of the public administration department at the Ministry of Economics. Finance Minister Anton Siluanov applauded the move, asserting that the leadership change represented part of a complete overhaul of the organization that would improve the reliability of the country's key economic indicators. (*The Moscow Times*, December 25, 2018)

MOSCOW INVESTS IN HYPERSONICS

As the U.S.-Russia arms control regime descends toward a historic nadir, Moscow is reportedly doubling down on a new source of proliferation concern. In a December 26th speech, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced his intention to deploy the country's "Avangard" hypersonic nuclear-capable missile system within the next year. Throughout his announcement, Putin underscored the fact that the Avangard's speed (with missiles traveling at 20 times the speed of sound) will render all current U.S. missile defenses obsolete – a reality that has been confirmed by multiple American military officials alarmed by Russia's pursuit of the technology. Although both the United States and China are currently working on next-generation hypersonic systems of their own, analysts assert that Moscow's Avangard deployment will raise the stakes even further during a time of heightened tensions between Russia and the West, creating serious proliferation concerns about hypersonic technologies and destabilizing the current international balance of power. (*The Washington Times*, December 26, 2018)

A KREMLIN "ENEMIES LIST"

A pro-Kremlin legislator wants to create a registry to track and stigmatize foreigners who criticize Russia. Konstantin Kosachev, the Chairman of the Federation Council's Committee on Foreign Affairs, proposed the registry during a meeting with Vladimir Putin. He suggested naming the list after Bill Browder, a long-time Putin adversary whose advocacy was crucial to the passage of the 2012 *Sergei Magnitsky Accountability Act*, a piece of U.S. legislation that sanctions Russian officials involved in human rights abuses. For his part, Browder responded on Twitter that he was flattered to be the namesake of the list of individuals "who have been most effective at sharing Russia's malicious intent abroad." (*The Moscow Times*, December 26, 2018)

LONG LIVE THE TSAR

The idea that term limits would finally force Russian President Vladimir Putin from office in 2024 may already be buckling under the weight of political machinations. At a scripted Kremlin meeting in late December, Duma Speaker Vyacheslav Volodin proposed making unspecified changes to the Russian constitution, noting that the current document reflects the political realities of the 1990s rather than those of the present day, and arguing that "the law, even one like the 'Basic Law,' isn't dogma." The meeting's transcript reportedly does not describe Putin's reaction, and the Kremlin has issued no public comment on Volodin's suggestion. However, Putin has made ambiguous references to constitutional amendments at recent press conferences, and analysts note that there is likely already a plan in the works to allow Putin to remain in power, particularly given the lack of any clear successor to lead the country in his absence. (*The Moscow Times*, December 26, 2018)

PUTIN'S LATEST POLITICAL PRISONER

Russia's Federal Security Service has detained an American citizen on charges of espionage. When retired Marine Paul Whelan was arrested in Moscow on December 28th, he was reportedly *en route* to a wedding. If convicted, Whelan could face 10-20 years in prison. Whelan's family learned of his arrest third-hand through the media, and has issued public statements expressing fear for his safety and roundly rejecting the Russian government's allegations against him. Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department has called on the Kremlin to provide consular access to Whelan as required by the terms of the Vienna Convention. Analysts are calling Whelan's arrest retaliation for the prosecution of Russian spy Maria Butina, who recently pled guilty to conspiracy against the United States, as well as for the subsequent indictments of other Russian individuals and entities. (*Newsweek*, January 1, 2019)