



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of  
Russian Government Actions and U.S. Policy

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2299

March 21, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman, Margot van Loon**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Russia

### A NEW SPOTLIGHT ON PUTIN'S WEALTH

A bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers has introduced new sanctions legislation that includes a provision requiring the Director of National Intelligence to report to Congress on Putin's net worth and assets. The measure is seen as part of U.S. efforts to more effectively place pressure on Russia's president and key decisionmakers in the Kremlin. Russian officials, however, are laughing off the effort - at least publicly. A statement from the Russian government has chalked up the step to anti-Russian sentiment and indicated that Moscow is not taking the provision seriously. (Reuters, February 28, 2019)

### SANCTIONS FAILING, SAYS KREMLIN'S MAIN CRITIC

Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny does not think much of the West's attempts to deter malign activity in Moscow. In a recent interview with the *Financial Times*, Navalny called American sanctions policy towards Russia "a chaotic, incomprehensible mess... pointless pencil pushing" and accused the United Kingdom of being unwilling to take meaningful punitive action because of the high volume of dirty Russian money that flows unchecked into Britain - as much as \$120 billion, according to some estimates. Navalny argued that measures currently in place do not accurately target the powerful inner circle of the Kremlin, and instead stand to inflict more pain on ordinary Russians than on the oligarchs surrounding Putin. Navalny specifically condemned the recent U.S. decision to lift sanctions previously in place on companies affiliated with industrial magnate Oleg Deripaska, one of Putin's closest allies. (*Financial Times*, February 27, 2019)

### AN ASSAULT ON JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

A sinister form of religious persecution appears to be resurfacing in Russia. Ever since the Russian Supreme Court ruled in 2017 that the Jehovah's Witnesses was to be considered an extremist organization, devotees of the group have faced increasing violence at the hands of the Russian state. In a horrific episode last month in the Siberian town of Surgut, 40 members of the organization were detained by the authorities, and seven were tortured during their detainment - an allegation confirmed by human rights NGO Amnesty International. An additional 140 members of the group are currently facing criminal charges all over the country as a result of similar raids. The *Washington Post* editorial board has called the crackdown a revival of "the dark practices of the past... the worst of the Soviet Union's interrogation methods." (*Washington Post*, March 2, 2019)

### OFFICIAL FEARS OF A FIFTH COLUMN

Suspicion is growing among Russian leaders that the core tenets of U.S. strategy against an adversary will involve regime change. Russian General Staff Chief Valery Gerasimov highlighted this sentiment in a recent speech before the Russian Academy of Military Sciences, where he accused the U.S. Department of Defense of developing a "Trojan Horse" strategy "based on the active use of the fifth column protest potential to destabilize the situation along with precision strikes on the most important targets."

*Bloomberg* columnist Leonid Bershidsky speculates that Gerasimov's comments were provoked by U.S. Air Force Chief General David Goldfein, who recently spoke to an audience at the Brookings Institute about the power of hidden threats in multi-domain operations - but Goldfein was referencing F-35 fighter jets, not fifth columns. While Gerasimov and other Russian military leaders feel confident in the strength of their conventional and nuclear forces, Bershidsky writes that they have no way to guard against the threat of "ordinary Russians. They are afraid their own people will knife them in the back if the U.S. tries regime change." (*Bloomberg*, March 4, 2019)

### CRIMINALIZING CRITICISM OF THE KREMLIN

Russia's controversial draft legislation to restrict online content has advanced another round, passing the State Duma in a vote earlier this month. Originally introduced in December, the bill proposes stiff fines of up to one million rubles (\$15,100) for any internet users or media organizations who spread false information, and 300,000 rubles plus jail time for those who disrespect the authorities. The bill will now proceed to the upper house of the Federal Assembly for further consideration. (*The Moscow Times*, March 7, 2019)