



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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PUTIN PLANS TO SPREAD THE WEALTH AROUND

The Kremlin's latest infrastructure and urban development plans envision building up some parts of Russia - while disadvantaging others. "As President Vladimir Putin attempts to pivot from foreign adventures to domestic affairs, his government has adopted a development plan for Russia's vast territory," writes Leonid Bershidsky in *The Moscow Times*. "The idea is to direct the country's population and economic activity to a limited number of urban areas linked by new transportation projects."

But the Putin government's plans are controversial - and unequal. Building on the ideas of his chief economic advisor, Alexei Kudrin, the Russian government is "prioritizing the development of a limited number of urban areas" as "counterweights to the increasing centralization of power and resources in the two biggest cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg," Bershidsky notes. The plan entails significant investments in cities such as Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, Novosibirsk and Vladivostok, and the designation of 19 cities "as possible future 'world class education and science centers.'"

The plan, however, risks making life in Russia even more unequal than it is currently. Bershidsky notes that "only 73 million Russians, about half the country's population, live in the 40 biggest urban areas." Therefore, "the unstated message of the plan is that [Russians] should move where growth is expected and where government efforts will be concentrated," because other areas will be overlooked. (*The Moscow Times*, March 7, 2019)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Such official pronouncements about urban modernization are hardly new, it should be noted. The Russian government has routinely promised modernization of the type unveiled in President Putin's latest "State of the Nation" address earlier this year. To date, however, the majority of these pledges have gone unfulfilled.]

PRISONER ABUSE IN YAROSLAVL

Disturbing new evidence of prisoner abuse has surfaced in Yaroslavl. Independent newspaper *Novaya Gazeta* has released two new videos depicting beatings and intimidation of inmates by the guards at the city's Corrective Colony No. 1. The videos were provided by Public Verdict, an NGO dedicated to assisting victims of human rights abuses, which has previously obtained and published similar videos of violence against prisoners. The new footage compounds pressure on an ongoing investigation into allegations of torture at another Yaroslavl penitentiary. Yet Public Verdict and other activist organizations maintain that such abuse is not limited to Yaroslavl but rather pervades the entire Russian penal system. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 11, 2019)

VIA ROSNEFT, MOSCOW PROPS UP CARACAS

The declining political fortunes of Venezuelan strongman Nicolas Maduro have focused international attention on the prospects of political change in Caracas - and on strategic partners of the Venezuelan regime that are trying to preserve the *status quo* there. An investigation by the Reuters news agency has uncovered that, over the past several years, Russian state oil giant ROSNEFT made massive investments totalling billions of dollars in Venezuela's energy sector as part of what appears to be a Kremlin-sanctioned effort to strengthen the Maduro regime. These investments continued despite the fact that the Russian energy firm's partnership with Venezuela's state oil concern, PDVSA, was far from profitable - with one joint venture alone racking up a whopping \$700 million in arrears. The total Russian investment in Venezuela, the study documents, is some \$9 billion since 2010, but the company "has yet to break even."

The reason for the continued investment, experts and observers say, has everything to do with politics. "From the very beginning it was a purely political project," one Russian oil executive notes. "We all had to contribute." (Reuters, March 14, 2019)

THE GOLAN AS FLASHPOINT

President Trump's March declaration that the United States formally recognizes Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights has opened up a new faultline in the increasingly fragile partnership between Jerusalem and Moscow. Russia is a historic ally of the Syrian regime, which claims sovereignty over the Heights - a territory that was occupied by Israel in response to Syrian aggression in the 1967 Six-Day War and has been held by the Jewish state since. Trump's acknowledgement of Israel's 52-year custody of the Golan, however, has set Russian politicians on edge. "Russia will never agree to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan," Oleg Morozov, a member of Vladimir Putin's "United Russia" party who serves as the first vice-speaker of the State Duma, has asserted. (*Jerusalem Post*, March 21, 2019)