



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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April 16, 2019 Ilan I. Berman, Margot van Loon

Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Military Innovation; Latin America; Russia

BACK TO ARMS CONTROL?

When it comes to reviving U.S.-Russian arms control, Moscow's top diplomat is placing the ball squarely in Washington's court. At last month's Geneva Conference on Disarmament, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov blamed the United States for provoking a new arms race with its withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and predicted that multiple countries would soon seek their own nuclear arsenals as security guarantees. He added that he hoped his "Western colleagues will be able to soberly assess the situation and will responsibly set priorities and resume collective efforts jointly with us on ensuring peace and security." (Itar-TASS, March 20, 2019)

THE SHADOW RULERS OF CAPTURED STATES

A billionaire clique is tightening its stranglehold on a number of former Soviet Republics, warns former Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili. These oligarchs may not hold formal political office, but their fortunes allow them to accrue informal power in political parties, security forces, and other organs of state power in Moldova, Ukraine, and Georgia, and they view this form of control as a business investment like any other. Writing in the *Washington Post*, Saakashvili cautions that by and large all of these oligarchs made their fortune in Russia, and are thus happy to help undermine any pro-Western policies in line with the Kremlin's priorities. Since billions of dollars of Western aid to support anti-corruption reforms have failed to halt the democratic backsliding in these countries, Saakashvili urges the United States to "treat corruption as the national security threat it is" and include the oligarchs on Treasury Department sanctions lists in order to ensure that aid money is spent appropriately. "Only by breaking the oligarchs' stranglehold to build strong democracies from within can the people of Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova defeat Putinism," he warns. (*Washington Post*, March 21, 2019)

A GROWING RUSSIAN PRESENCE IN VENEZUELA

The Kremlin recently dispatched a contingent of troops to Venezuela to help prop up the beleaguered regime of strongman Nicolas Maduro, and these forces are now on the ground in Caracas. Two planes reportedly transported 100 troops to the Venezuelan capital in late March. The Foreign Ministry in Moscow is downplaying the significance of the troops' movement, commenting only that a military-technical cooperation agreement governs the presence of the "Russian specialists."

Russia's latest moves in the Americas, however, are generating concern in Washington. U.S. officials have disclosed that the Russian contingent in Venezuela contains both special forces operators and "cybersecurity personnel" - a composition that observers say potentially signifies the Maduro regime is stepping up surveillance on its opposition, and seeking to reinforce government infrastructure in the face of potential hostile action by outside countries, such as the United States. (Reuters, March 26, 2019; Reuters, March 26, 2019)

RUSSIA'S NERVOUS PRESS TOES THE OFFICIAL LINE

Russia's skittish media outlets are taking self-censorship to new heights. A number of news channels are said to have deleted stories from their websites about recent graffiti scrawled on a government building which called Russian President Vladimir Putin an anti-gay slur. So far, at least five news outlets in Yaroslavl have purged the offending material from their web pages - fearful that they might run afoul of newly-enacted legislation that makes it unlawful to post material showing "blatant disrespect" of authorities online. The Kremlin, for its part, is doing its best to police the new ordinance. At least one outlet took the step of deleting the offending material after receiving a formal warning from ROSKOMNADZOR, Russia's official state censor. (*The Moscow Times*, April 2, 2019)

MOSCOW'S MILITARY MIND CONTROL

Is Russia's military experimenting with fringe science? A new magazine run by Russia's Defense Ministry has claimed that parapsychology and telepathy played a large role in the Kremlin's military campaigns in Chechnya during the 1990s and early 2000s. The claims, authored by a Russian colonel and published in the February 2019 edition of the *Army Digest*, outlined that telepathy had been used in order to "wiretap conversations, disrupt software, identify potential terrorists and read foreign-language documents locked in a safe — all using nothing but their minds." The article also noted that Russian soldiers are provided training that allows them to withstand adversary use of the same sort of techniques. (*The Moscow Times*, April 3, 2019)