



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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RUSSIA'S MILITARY GOES TO THE MOVIES

The Russian Ministry of Defense is taking on a new mission: art and culture. Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu recently announced plans to create a film studio dedicated to producing movies about the modern Russian army, citing as justification a lack of films that recognize and celebrate the current state of the military. As part of these efforts, the Ministry also plans to hold an annual army film festival and increase prizes and awards available to artists who produce this content. (The Moscow Times, March 27, 2019)

RUSSIAN RADICALS AND AMERICA'S ALT-RIGHT

A new vector of Russian influence in U.S. domestic affairs is emerging as the FBI uncovers intelligence linking radical groups in the U.S. and Russia. The FBI has reportedly obtained evidence that the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), an ultra-nationalist group based in St. Petersburg, has created a course called "Partisan" on paramilitary tactics and offered it up as a training option for nationalists across the globe. Over 300 Russians dispatched to fight in Ukraine are believed to have taken the course before departing for the conflict. Three Swedish right-wing activists who staged a series of bombing attacks in 2017 were also radicalized by their participation in "Partisan," according to Swedish officials.

RIM's influence, moreover, extends beyond Europe. The group's leaders reportedly reached out to the organizers of the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, to offer them a spot in "Partisan." Although both parties have since denied that any U.S. citizens actually took part in the course, one of the organizers of "Unite the Right" confirmed that he has worked with RIM for several years, noting that "for us, the relationship has been to share political ideas... I do think the idea of a working political relationship between American nationalists and Russian nationalists would honestly frighten the FBI more than training with guns. Ideas are more dangerous." (Washington Free Beacon, April 5, 2019)

A DIFFERENT KIND OF DISINFORMATION

The Kremlin appears to be exploiting the recent measles outbreak in the U.S. as a new battleground in its information warfare campaign. A new study from George Washington University documents that thousands of Russian troll accounts on social media platforms are using the outbreak to amplify and spread messaging that fuels social discord in the United States. While the troll account content ranges the entire spectrum of the debate, the overall increased volume of messaging on the topic creates a false perception of the "anti-vaxxer" movement's size, distorts the grassroots debate over the effectiveness of vaccines, and seeks to undermine trust in public health institutions.

The strategy recalls old Soviet disinformation campaigns like Operation Infektion, which spread a false narrative that the U.S. government invented the HIV virus in order to target black and gay Americans. Ultimately, Operation Infektion damaged America's reputation abroad, complicated efforts to combat the virus, and decreased public trust in the competence of the U.S. government. (Foreign Policy, April 9, 2019)

THE KREMLIN VERSUS THE WORLD-WIDE WEB, CONTINUED

The Russian government has taken another step forward in its efforts to restrict Internet freedom. On April 16th, the Duma approved the so-called "sovereign Internet bill," which if passed would create a domestic domain name system (RuNet) and require all Internet service providers in Russia to route web traffic through government-controlled points. Proponents say that the bill will protect Russia from offensive cyber attacks and prevent the spread of harmful information. Meanwhile, critics perceive a malicious move to constrain free speech and silence government opponents and dissenting platforms like popular messaging app Telegram, which has clashed with the country's security services over demands for access to encrypted user information. The bill now passes to the upper house of the Russian parliament, whose members are likely to approve it for President Putin's signature. (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 16, 2019)