



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2305

April 23, 2019 Ilan I. Berman, Margot van Loon

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Corruption; North Korea; Russia

THE CLOSING OF THE KGB FILES

Russian authorities are increasingly restricting access to historical files that potentially shed light on the egregious human rights abuses carried out by Soviet authorities during the rule of Joseph Stalin. The Federal Security Service (FSB) has refused multiple requests from historians for information on key figures complicit in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens during the Great Terror of 1937-38 – particularly the "troika" three-panel judges from the NKVD (the FSB's predecessor) who issued the sentences that condemned victims to execution without trial. Two Russian courts have already upheld the FSB's decision to seal its archives on the basis that living descendants of the judges could suffer if their family members' names were made public.

The attempted censorship, moreover, extends beyond Moscow. Reportedly, authorities in Novosibirsk issued secret orders to destroy prisoner records from the local gulag and have sealed off all other NKVD files. Nikita Petrov, a historian for the civil rights NGO Memorial, called the trend "a sad sign of the times." (*The Moscow Times*, March 14, 2019)

CRIMEA'S TATARS AT RISK

The repression of ethnic Tatars on the Crimean Peninsula is growing more flagrant. On March 27th, authorities arrested 20 Crimean Tatar men, most of whom had ties to the Crimean Solidarity Initiative, a human rights organization that has helped political prisoners and organized demonstrations against ongoing abuses by the Russian authorities in the occupied territory. The arrests took place after early morning searches of the men's homes by Federal Security Service (FSB) officers and local police - reportedly carried out without court orders and employing rough tactics.

The FSB is claiming that the men, who were denied access to legal representation upon their arrests, are members of Hizb-ut-Tahrir, a pan-Islamic party that the Russian government has labeled an international terrorist organization. Activists from Memorial and other similar organizations, however, assert that such accusations are being exploited by the Russian government to justify life sentences, religious persecution, and – in extreme cases – extradition to and torture in Uzbekistan in retaliation for the victims' civic activism. (Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group, March 28, 2019)

THE NEW FACE OF RUSSIAN PROTEST

It has been less than a decade since the momentous 2011 wave of protests in Russia, but the demographic profile of those Russians willing to take to the streets has shifted dramatically. Whereas earlier protesters tended to be middle-class and between the ages of 25 and 40, Russian sociologists studying the phenomenon report that the typical protester today is younger, poorer, and generally has not completed any form of higher education. This trend, in turn, has shifted the conversation further to the left on issues like economic inequality and created a more populist spirit for demonstrations. These younger protesters tend to have "less to lose" and feel less inspired by older generations or by opposition leaders like Alexei Navalny. Oleg Zhuravlyev of Tyumen University, a sociologist who contributed to the research, comments that "today's youths are growing up in a politicized milieu, unlike their older brothers and sisters" and they feel that they "can protest with much greater impunity." (*The Moscow Times*, March 26, 2019)

A KIM-PUTIN SUMMIT?

Russian president Vladimir Putin has reportedly invited North Korean leader Kim Jong-un to visit Russia in the near future. According to the TASS news agency, Pyongyang has yet to formally respond to the offer, but a close aide to the North Korean leader conducted what appears to be a preliminary scouting trip to Moscow and Vladivostok last month, suggesting that Kim intends to accept. The invitation comes during a time of increased engagement between Russia and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), including a trip by the Russian Interior Minister to Pyongyang this month. The diplomatic tempo has Korea watchers speculating that Kim is trying to strengthen and flaunt a closer bilateral relationship with Moscow in order to break the stalled talks with Washington on the DPRK's nuclear program. (*Korea Times*, April 4, 2019)

RUSSIA'S WIDENING WEALTH GAP

At a time when Russians are increasingly willing to take to the streets to protest economic inequality, the first comprehensive study of the issue in Russia has fully justified their grievances. New data from the Moscow Higher School of Economics and state-owned VEB Bank shows that 89 percent of the country's financial assets (including 92 percent of all fixed-term deposits and 89 percent of all cash reserves) are held by the wealthiest three percent of citizens. Meanwhile, the poorest 20 percent of citizens hold only six percent of the country's assets, and roughly 13 percent of the entire population is considered to be living in extreme poverty by developed world standards. (*The Moscow Times*, April 12, 2019)