



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2307

May 9, 2019 **Ilan I. Berman, Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; NATO; Russia

A NEW LOW FOR RUSSIA-NATO RELATIONS

Moscow is more pessimistic than ever about the state of its relations with NATO. In an interview with RIA Novosti, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko confirmed that all channels of military and civilian cooperation between Moscow and Brussels have ceased to function – the culmination of NATO's decision to suspend cooperation following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Grushko, who served as Moscow's permanent representative to NATO from 2012 to 2018, blamed the Alliance for "abandoning a positive agenda in its relations with Russia" and warned that any potential Russian-NATO conflict would be "a humanitarian catastrophe." (*The Moscow Times*, April 15, 2019)

REVIVING THE KOMSOMOL

Echoes of patriotic youth organizations prevalent in the USSR during the Cold War can be seen in the *Yunarmia*, the new Russian "Youth Army" run by the Ministry of Defense. The Ministry describes the organization as a "youth military-patriotic movement" designed to inculcate patriotic values and a spirit of public service among children ages 8-18. Youth Army members discuss military history, practice exercises and drills, and compete against each other in cadet competitions. There are incentives available for those who join: advanced merits towards an actual army career, extra credit at universities, or – particularly for families in low-income or impoverished parts of the country – a perceived gateway to a better, more financially stable life. Coercive measures are also apparently in play: a Defense Ministry memo earlier this year warned that "the absence of officers' children in the ranks of the Youth Army will be regarded as a misunderstanding by military personnel of the principles of state policy in the field of the patriotic education of citizens."

In its three years of existence, more than 416,000 Russian children have joined the Youth Army, and the organization is aiming to have a total of one million members by 2020. Many Russian adults are predisposed to the concept, recalling their own adolescence in groups like the Pioneers and the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (Komsomol). For others, however, the nostalgic overtones are ominous. They see the organization as the Kremlin's new "loyalty factory," created to reinforce perceptions of Russia as a "besieged fortress," militarize the childhood of its members, and strip support from Alexei Navalny and other opposition elements. Some even see it as a preemptive move by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu to build up a base of support and make a play for power when Vladimir Putin's last term comes to an end. (*The Moscow Times*, April 17, 2019)

HOLDING THE LINE IN CARACAS

As U.S. pressure increases on the government of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela, Moscow is loudly voicing its concern about the potential for American military action in the crisis-stricken country. According to Russian state-owned broadcaster *Sputnik*, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova disparaged the "ultimatum" from high-level U.S. government officials that Maduro step down before the end of the year or face a potential military intervention. Zakharova pointed to comments made by U.S. Southern Command and by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to indicate that Washington continues to consider the use of force an option. (*Sputnik*, April 18, 2019)

RUSSIA'S STILL-BOOMING BOOTLEG INDUSTRY

The volume of illegal alcohol sold on the Russian market is staggering, according to new figures from the government's official regulator, ROSALKOGOLREGULIROVANIE. Out of 11 million liters of inspected alcohol, 5.2 million had been sold illegally, the regulator reported – or roughly 47.5 percent of the total volume inspected. The increase in illegal online transactions is partially to blame: this \$30 million market grew 23 percent in 2018. Vodka specifically followed a similar trend; ROSALKOGOLREGULIROVANIE found that 31 percent of all vodka sales were illegal transactions, a troubling statistic given the country's enforcement of quality standards on domestic vodka. (*The Moscow Times*, April 19, 2019)

MR. KIM GOES TO VLADIVOSTOK

A much-vaunted summit between North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin took place at the end of April, marking the first time in almost eight years that the leaders have met in person. At Putin's invitation, Kim arrived in the Far Eastern Russian city of Vladivostok by train. Prior to the summit, experts speculated that Kim's preferred agenda would likely include sanctions relief, guest worker exceptions for North Koreans in Russia, and potential investment by Moscow in transportation infrastructure linking the two countries. The summit was perceived as advantageous on both sides: Pyongyang views engagement with Moscow as a safety valve against pressure from Washington in the wake of the failed Trump-Kim meeting in Hanoi earlier this Spring, while the summit presented an opportunity for Putin to reinforce Russia's image as a global diplomatic leader.

In Vladivostok, the two leaders reportedly enjoyed a good personal rapport, and discussions lasted longer than expected. Afterward, Putin announced that he believes a deal on North Korea's nuclear program remains possible, but only if the country is offered stronger security guarantees than the U.S. can provide on its own – essentially calling for a return to the Six-Party negotiating framework that includes Russia, China, Japan, and South Korea as well. U.S. officials, however, are taking a different lesson from the Russo-Korean meeting; William Hagerty, the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, has noted that "the fact you see Kim Jong Un meeting with Vladimir Putin underscores the fact that the sanctions are working and the sanctions are putting extreme economic pressure on the North Korean regime." (*The Moscow Times*, April 24, 2019; Reuters, April 24, 2019)