



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2308

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**Related Categories:** Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Corruption; Iran; Russia; Ukraine

## BROWDER IN THE KREMLIN'S CROSSHAIRS YET AGAIN

For the seventh time, Moscow has filed an arrest request with Interpol against William Browder, an American financier who made his fortune in Russia in the early 1990s before being kicked out of the country. He has since become one of the Kremlin's staunchest enemies, lobbying for the sanctioning of Russian officials guilty of corruption or human rights abuses via the Magnitsky Act. For years, the Kremlin has unsuccessfully sought Browder's arrest on charges of bankruptcy and tax evasion – charges Browder maintains are politically motivated by his activism. In response to the latest arrest request, submitted just prior to the mid-April meeting of the Interpol Commission, Browder tweeted that "something needs to be fixed at Interpol if dictators can go back unlimited times to chase their enemies with bogus warrants." (Reuters, April 9, 2019)

## HOW THE KREMLIN INTIMIDATES THE MEDIA

Russia's state-owned oil giant Rosneft has enlisted the support of law enforcement to combat unfavorable media coverage. In April, the Reuters news agency had originally written a story suggesting that Rosneft was helping Venezuela's state-owned PDVSA evade U.S. sanctions. However, upon the story's release, Rosneft accused the wire agency of "systematically creating and disseminating disinformation, legalizing rumors in the interests of customers and inventing information to damage the Russian economy, companies and the state" – an accusation that carried with it the implicit intervention of Russian authorities. In response, Reuters issued corrections to the story to cast Rosneft in a less critical light. The incident is not the first time that the Russian authorities have come after a foreign news agency; last year, the media regulatory body ROSKOMNADZOR began a formal investigation into the BBC over the bureau's coverage of Russia matters. (*The Moscow Times*, April 24, 2019)

## HOW RUSSIA GETS RICH OFF STOLEN INFO

A new investigation by BBC reporter Andrey Zakharov has exposed a troubling black market for stolen personal data in Russia. Within this community, the theft of a specific person's data is referred to as "online penetration." In its investigation, the BBC found that personal call records can be purchased for the equivalent of \$30, mobile location data for \$155, and bank passwords and balances for roughly \$300. Most of the data brokers are not motivated by malice, but rather boredom at their jobs (typically at banks, telecom companies, or state agencies) and a desire to supplement their income; most of the data buyers tend to be scammers, private investigators, or businesses engaged in corporate espionage. The BBC report found that corporate security and law enforcement usually manage to catch "penetrators" within a couple months of activity, but they generally face lenient punishment that rarely includes jail time, since the state only appears to take the cases seriously if there are intelligence implications (as with the Bellingcat investigators' use of the Rossiskii Passport database to expose the military intelligence ties of the Salisbury Novichok poisoners). (*Meduza*, April 26, 2019)

## THE KREMLIN STRENGTHENS ITS HOLD ON THE DONBAS

Rather than offering Ukraine's newly elected president, Volodymyr Zelinsky, a congratulatory phone call, Vladimir Putin instead fired a metaphorical shot across his bow. At a summit in Beijing, Putin announced that Moscow is granting Russian citizenship to residents of the separatist regions in the East. He added that he is considering a proposal to offer Russian citizenship through a simplified application process that would be available to all Ukrainians outside the disputed areas as well. The international responses to the announcement were largely critical, since Russia has used this tactic in the past to alter demographics in areas of frozen conflict and lay the groundwork for military intervention in order to "protect" Russian citizens. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 27, 2019)

## RUSSIA STEPS SOFTLY IN POST-WAR SYRIA

Moscow is continuing to push for a political settlement to the long-running Syrian conflict. After a new round of Russian-led talks in Kazakhstan, chief negotiator Alexander Lavrentyev asserted his belief that the Syrian government and its domestic opposition may be able to agree on the structure of a new government in just a few months. Meanwhile, Putin commented that any kind of full-scale military assault against militants is "not expedient now" due to the need to protect civilians on the ground – just after a human rights monitoring group alleged that Russian airstrikes had killed 10 civilians in Idlib. (*Riyadh Al Arabiya*, April 27, 2019)

## **MOSCOW EYES TRUMP'S ZERO TOLERANCE IRAN POLICY**

With Washington moving to block all Iranian oil from the international market, Russia is facing a pivotal decision regarding its own oil production. Since the Trump administration's decision to end sanctions waivers for Iran's primary customers will effectively remove all remaining Iranian crude from the market, fears of a shortage in the wake of the decision quickly prompted a spike in prices. However, Putin confirmed that Russia would abide by its production agreement with OPEC, which restricts output to its current 1.5 million barrels per day, and thus would not step in to fill any shortfall. No other OPEC nation, including Saudi Arabia, has shown any sign of abandoning the production agreement. (*France24*, April 27, 2019)