



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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RUSSIANS VOTE WITH THEIR FEET

A new Gallup survey suggests an unprecedented level of dissatisfaction with life in Russia, based on the number of the country's citizens who wish to leave it permanently. The survey results indicate that a full 20 percent of Russia's population would emigrate if given the chance to do so, with most reporting either Germany or the United States as their preferred destinations. The number of respondents expressing this sentiment has tripled since 2014, when – amid the Sochi Olympics, the annexation of Crimea, and the imposition of Western sanctions – only eight percent reported a desire to leave Russia. According to the data, younger and urban Russians are more predisposed to the idea of emigration; 44 percent of the 15-29 year-olds surveyed expressed a desire to leave, as compared to only nine percent of those in the 46-60 year-old age group. A desire to emigrate has historically been inversely correlated to presidential approval ratings, and this pattern appears to hold today – 40 percent of respondents desiring to leave disapproved of President Vladimir Putin's leadership, while only 12 percent approved. (Gallup, April 4, 2019)

A KINDER VIEW OF STALIN

Russian public opinion toward the late Soviet strongman Josef Stalin is the most positive it has been in decades, according to a recent poll by the Levada Center. Of the 1,600 Russians who participated in the survey, 70 percent believed that the dictator had played a "completely positive or relatively positive" role on behalf of Russia. The survey results are a striking change from 2016, when only 54 percent expressed the same sentiment.

Some Kremlin critics attribute the change in sentiment to Vladimir Putin's efforts to restore old Soviet glory and obscure the crimes and oppression that occurred under Stalin's regime. However, sociologist Leonty Byzov hypothesizes that the trend may reflect widespread Russian dissatisfaction with Putin's current leadership, as "Stalin is seen in society as a defender of the oppressed... a symbol of justice and an alternative to the current authorities, who are judged to be unfair, cruel, and uncaring about the people." (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 16, 2019)

RUSSIA'S UNDERWATER MILITARY MODERNIZATION

At the end of April, Russia launched the longest submarine ever built. The Belgorod, a 184-meter, nuclear-powered vessel, has been designed to carry up to six underwater drones, as well as deep-water rescue vehicles. While the Belgorod program began in the early 1990s, funding problems forced multi-year delays. Now, however, the finish line is in sight; the state-run TASS news agency reports that the submarine will be deployed and operational by late 2020 or early 2021. Its cargo is even more significant: the nuclear-capable Poseidon drones have been described on state television and in Vladimir Putin's recent state of the nation addresses as designed to strike enemy coastal facilities and aircraft carriers while remaining "impossible to intercept." These drones are expected to be operational by 2027. (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, April 23, 2019)

BUYING INTO THE "BELT AND ROAD"

When the Belt and Road Forum met in late April, it had a new Russian proposal to consider. At the gathering of nations participating in the Chinese-led initiative, Russian President Vladimir Putin raised the possibility of uniting the Northern Sea Route – the primary Arctic maritime shipping channel – with the Chinese Sea Silk Road. The initiative marks the most substantive overture yet by the Kremlin toward China's Belt and Road Initiative, and a telling sign that Russian officials are considering the potential economic dividends of the multi-billion dollar project. Realizing Putin's proposal would require massive infrastructure investment to support the increased transit, but Russia now sees this as feasible given that cooperation between Beijing and Moscow is becoming increasingly robust. (Sputnik, April 27, 2019)

BUTINA RULING RISKS RUSSIAN RETALIATION

The strange legal case of Maria Butina – the former graduate student arrested last year for being a Russian agent – is wrapping up. Butina, who has been in U.S. custody since July 2018, previously pleaded guilty to one count of conspiring to act as a foreign agent for Russia through attempts to infiltrate conservative activist groups and promote a Russia-friendly agenda in influential Washington circles. Prior to her sentencing at the end of April, Butina's legal team submitted a sentencing memo requesting a lenient ruling from the judge that would acknowledge the nine months in custody that she has already served, since "just punishment does not require additional incarceration."

However, despite the pre-sentencing request, Butina received an 18-month prison sentence – an outcome that triggered immediate protest from Moscow. The Russian Embassy filed a formal diplomatic note of complaint with the U.S. State Department, alleging that the court's decision was unlawful and violated Butina's human rights. Russian President Vladimir Putin weighed in as well, taking a moment at a recent press conference to denounce the ruling as a "travesty of justice." Finally, Russian lawmakers are reportedly weighing the retaliatory idea of a "Butina List": compiling a list of all U.S. officials accused of "violating the fundamental rights and freedoms of Russian citizens." (The Moscow Times, April 20, 2019; The Washington Times, May 3, 2019)