



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2310

May 28, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Europe Military; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Russia; Ukraine

## HOW MOSCOW IS SOLIDIFYING ITS HOLD ON EASTERN UKRAINE

The Kremlin's campaign to divide and subvert the loyalties of Ukrainian citizens appears to be advancing. In the wake of Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent directive to simplify the issuance of Russian passports to residents of the disputed separatist areas of eastern Ukraine, the Russian Interior Ministry has confirmed that a new migration center is now open in Russia's Southern Federal District, just across the common border between the two countries.

The new center is reportedly able to accept up to 200 applications per day from residents of Luhansk, in Ukraine's disputed Donbas region. Meanwhile, Ukraine's newly elected president, Volodymyr Zelenskiy, is seeking to counter the Russian initiative. Via social media platform Twitter, Zelenskiy has declared that Moscow should not expect high Ukrainian demand for Russian passports, and that in the meantime Russian citizens are welcome to apply for Ukrainian citizenship as well. (*The Moscow Times*, April 29, 2019)

## RUSSIAN INTERNET TO BECOME A REALITY

For months, Russian legislators and regulators have pushed for stronger state control over the Internet, claiming a need to protect Russian-language sites from U.S. cyber aggression. Now, the "Internet sovereignty bill" recently signed into law by Vladimir Putin provides a template to do exactly that. The new law, which passed muster in the Russian parliament despite substantial public opposition, mandates the creation of an alternate domain name system (DNS) – a unique network that is separate from the global Internet. The government will now move to implement the controversial legislation, and if successful, Russia would become the first country to establish its own separate national Internet. However, experts say that the practical challenges associated with creating a separate, parallel Internet exclusively for Russians will prove difficult to overcome. (*The Moscow Times*, May 1, 2019)

## MOSCOW CALLING

For the first time in weeks, President Donald Trump spoke directly to Vladimir Putin in a phone call that lasted over an hour in early May. The conversation covered numerous geopolitical disputes, with both presidents reportedly warning each other not to interfere in the Venezuelan crisis and trading demands on how best to improve negotiating outcomes with North Korea. Nonetheless, both leaders remained publicly positive about the conversation, with Trump describing the call on Twitter as "very productive!" and the Kremlin acknowledging the "business-like and constructive" discussion. (*CNBC*, May 3, 2019)

## LETTERS FROM LEFORTOVO

After months of detention in a Russian prison, American Paul Whelan has finally been permitted to contact his family. According to his brother, a backlogged cache of 40 letters from Whelan arrived in late April, long after Russian officials claimed his correspondence had been "lost." The contents of the long-awaited letters reportedly suggest that he was in relatively good spirits and health at the time of their writing. Whelan has been detained in Moscow's Lefortovo Prison since late 2018 on charges of espionage, but Russian officials have yet to come forward with evidence to substantiate the charges. In the meantime, Whelan's ability to contact the outside world has been subject to exceedingly stringent restrictions. Evgeny Enikeev, an activist with the Moscow Helsinki Group and a member of the Public Monitoring Commission, fears that "if our system sinks its teeth into someone [like Whelan], he will not be released." (*Washington Post*, May 5, 2019)

## BLOCKING MOSCOW'S ARCTIC MANEUVERS

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is calling for international vigilance to counter Russian ambitions in the Arctic. Prior to a May meeting of foreign ministers of Arctic Council member states, Pompeo gave a speech in Finland in which he promised to match Russia's increased militarization of the region with additional U.S. military exercises and force presence there. He warned that "just because the Arctic is a place of wilderness does not mean it should become a place of lawlessness... we know Russian territorial ambitions can turn violent." Pompeo also rejected the idea that China – an observer state on the Arctic Council that claims to be a "near-Arctic nation" – should be entitled to any regional claims. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 7, 2019)