



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Russia

IN YEKATERINBURG, A RARE VICTORY FOR POPULAR OPINION

Local authorities in Yekaterinburg who had planned to build a new Orthodox church in their city have backed down after an unusual episode of public backlash. After the announcement that the church would be built in a popular public park, multiple days of protests ensued, resulting in almost 100 demonstrators arrested. When announcing his final decision to suspend construction and find a new location for the church, regional governor Yevgeny Kuivashev appeared to defer to the weight of public opinion, citing a poll by the Russia Public Opinion Center (VTSIOM) that found 74 percent of the region's residents opposed the original location. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 22, 2019)

DEVELOPMENT GAP PLAGUES RUSSIA'S LARGEST CITIES

A new report by Strelka Consulting Bureau has found that it may take decades for Russia's largest cities to catch up with Moscow's level of economic development. The study examined all sixteen Russian cities with a population of greater than one million –which cumulatively constitute one third of the country's gross domestic product and found that, if current trends continue, the fifteen cities trailing the capital will need roughly an entire century to reach Moscow's current level of *per capita* gross domestic product. Strelka recommended increasing government support for small and medium enterprises in order to start shrinking the existing economic disparity in these cities and accelerate their development. (*The Moscow Times*, May 27, 2019)

HOSPITALS TARGETED BY DAMASCUS, MOSCOW

New evidence suggests that the Syrian military may be continuing to systematically target civilian infrastructure with help from Russian forces. According to medical officials in Idlib province, at least six hospitals were bombed by the regime and its Russian allies during the month of May, with estimates of civilians killed as a result ranging from 160 to 250. The targeted hospitals had allegedly been included on a deconfliction list provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to the combatants with the goal of minimizing civilian casualties and protecting important civilian infrastructure. While the UN has not independently confirmed that the bombed hospitals were included on the deconfliction list, Idlib province's director of health, Munzer Khalil, has asserted his belief that the facilities were indeed targeted intentionally and systematically. (*Financial Times*, May 29, 2019)

IS RUSSIA VIOLATING THE CTBT?

Amid a historic nadir in U.S.-Russian arms control, American officials are suggesting that Moscow may be conducting secret low-yield nuclear tests. A new U.S. intelligence assessment claims that testing activity detected at Novaya Zemlya in northern Russia is in violation of the country's commitments under the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty's (CTBT) "zero-yield standard" – a provision of the treaty that prohibits any experiments that result in a nuclear explosive yield. Before the estimate was leaked, Defense Intelligence Agency Director Lt. Gen Robert Ashley appeared to verify its contents in comments at a public event, but other Administration officials have not offered further details on the matter, and Russia asserts that it remains in compliance with the CTBT.

However, other organizations in the arms control community have disputed the assessment. After Ashley's comments, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty Organization (CTBTO), the watchdog agency responsible for monitoring treaty compliance, conducted a test of its sensor network for evidence of any significant blast. CTBTO Executive Secretary Lassina Zerbo confirmed that the sensors would have detected any explosion at Novaya Zemlya of at least 100 tons – a relatively miniscule yield – and thus he remained skeptical that Moscow would attempt such a test: "if you go that low [in yield], what value added does it bring to a country with nuclear weapons?" (*Wall Street Journal*, May 29, 2019; *Guardian* (London), May 30, 2019)

KREMLIN PRESSURE SKEWS POLLING

Russia's state polling agency appears to have dramatically altered the results of a survey about voters' trust in politicians after a direct intervention by the Kremlin. In a poll published by the Russian Public Opinion Center (VTsIOM) at the end of May, only 31.7 percent of respondents indicated that they trusted Russian President Vladimir Putin. After the results were published, the Kremlin reportedly confronted the sociologists involved and asked them to reconcile that result with Putin's 65 percent approval rating. Shortly afterwards, VTsIOM published new results showing that 72.3 percent of respondents now felt that they trusted Putin – a sudden shift that may have been caused by a redesign in survey questions from open-ended to a more straightforward yes-or-no format, according to analysts at the Levada Center, another polling group. (*The Moscow Times*, May 31, 2019)