



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2322

July 26, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Cybersecurity and Cyberwarfare; Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Iran ; Russia

THE KREMLIN BACKS IRAN, STILL

Amid escalating tensions between the United States and Iran, Russia has offered an apparent show of support for the regime in Tehran. In a public statement in late June, Russia's Foreign Ministry declared that it was committed to help counter a new round of sanctions recently imposed on the Islamic Republic by Washington. Meanwhile, Russia's special envoy for Asian countries, Zamir Kabulov, went so far as to promise that "Tehran won't be alone if the U.S., God forbid, takes wild and irresponsible actions against it." (*The Moscow Times*, June 26, 2019)

THE CYBER SHADOW WAR CONTINUES

Russian Internet giant Yandex has confirmed that it was hit by a cyber attack in late 2018 by hackers likely linked to Western intelligence services. The hackers responsible for the attack deployed malware to learn how the company authenticates its user accounts – knowledge that would allow the hackers to successfully impersonate Yandex users in the future. Although Yandex has not been able to attribute the country responsible for the breach of its systems, the rare malware used in the attack was identified as "Regin," one of the technical tools whose existence was leaked by Edward Snowden in 2014. Snowden's disclosure confirmed that "Regin" is used only by the intelligence services of the so-called "Five Eyes" nations: the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. The Kremlin has sought to downplay the incident, and Yandex officials have stated that no user data was compromised by the attack. However, U.S. cyber security firm Symantec commented that "Regin" is "the crown jewel of attack frameworks used for espionage." (Reuters, June 27, 2019)

PUTIN PROCLAIMS THE END OF LIBERALISM

Vladimir Putin's latest public comments about his perceptions of the world were full of warning and reprimand. During a pre-G20 interview with the *Financial Times*, Russia's president asserted that "the liberal idea has become obsolete. It has come into conflict with the interests of the overwhelming majority of the population." Putin doubled down on the idea that traditional culture and values across the globe had been crowded out by multiculturalism, and he blamed Western governments (including Germany's Angela Merkel) for failing to protect or reassure their citizens. He also lamented that "there are no rules at all" in the international system, blaming American unilateralism for chaos in the Middle East and the looming prospects of a new nuclear arms race. (*Financial Times*, June 27, 2019)

EU SANCTIONS CONTINUE

In a unanimous vote, EU leaders have extended sanctions on Russia for another six months. The sanctions target entities in Russia's banking and energy sectors, and have been in place since the summer of 2014 following Moscow's annexation of the Crimean peninsula. When discussing the decision to further extend the penalties, members of the bloc cited the lack of progress to date in implementing the Minsk agreements that would end the fighting in Eastern Ukraine. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, June 27, 2019)

MOSCOW REJOINS PACE

In a June 24th resolution, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) voted to restore Russia's full membership and rights in the bloc. The resolution passed with 118 votes in favor, 62 opposed, and 10 abstentions – and despite a full 220 amendments introduced by the Ukrainian delegation to stop its passage. Andrey Kortunov of the Carnegie Moscow Center writes that the debate over the resolution illuminates an ongoing struggle within PACE's membership between "pragmatists" (who see value in working with Moscow and believe that future improvements to the relationship are possible) and "skeptics" (who see Moscow as irreformable and fear that the Kremlin will seek to exploit its PACE membership to divide the body's membership and advance its own aggressive agenda). Kortunov labels the June 24th resolution a victory for the pragmatists, but predicts that Russia will need "superhuman diplomatic mastery" to find areas of common interest with other PACE members and win their trust. (Carnegie Moscow Center, June 27, 2019)

CRIMINALIZING DISRESPECT OF HISTORY

Foreigners lacking sufficient respect for Russian history may find themselves the latest targets of the Kremlin's wrath. Last month, Russia's Defense Ministry introduced legislation in the State Duma that would permit sanctions and other legal consequences for anyone deemed to have desecrated war memorials abroad. In his comments on the bill, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu singled out culprits of vandalism and falsifiers of historical facts – as well as those who "turn a blind eye" to such acts. Should the legislation pass, anyone found guilty of these crimes would be denied entrance to the country and forfeit any business assets in Russia. (*The Moscow Times*, June 28, 2019)