



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2324

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**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Africa; Caucasus; Latin America; Russia

### GEORGIAN ANGER AT RUSSIA BOILS OVER

In late June and early July, the Republic of Georgia was rocked by significant political unrest. The protests initially began as a demonstration against Russian influence in the country, after a Russian delegation visited the Georgian parliament and one member of the delegation sat in the Speaker's seat to give a formal address. However, the rallies turned violent after Georgian police used rubber bullets and water cannons to break up the demonstrators, resulting in the injury of more than 240 people. Subsequently, the protests intensified, with participants demanding the resignation of Interior Minister Giorgi Gakharia over his authorization of the violent police tactics deployed against them. Organizer Giga Makarishvili vowed to resort to creative but peaceful "guerrilla tactics" to maintain the group's momentum. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 4, 2019)

### A HELPING HAND FOR VENEZUELA'S MILITARY

Russia's support for the embattled government of Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela remains unwavering. In the latest sign of the Kremlin's continued backing, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov announced in early July that Russia would help strengthen Venezuela's armed forces. According to Ryabkov, the redoubled military assistance from Moscow would focus largely on training relating to Russian equipment that had previously been purchased by Caracas - and which has bolstered the Maduro regime's ability to respond to domestic unrest. (Reuters, July 5, 2019)

### RUSSIAN TROLLS IN TRIPOLI?

Members of a research organization with ties to Russia's biggest troll farm have been detained in Libya. According to the Foundation for the Protection of Traditional Values, two of its employees were arrested in the North African nation in May and have been detained ever since. The think tank strongly refuted the idea that the employees were running any kind of election interference in Libya, claiming that the staffers were merely on the ground to study public opinion. However, one of the detainees, Maxim Shugaley, has previously been linked to the Internet Research Agency (the infamous troll farm in St. Petersburg that spearheaded Russia's campaign to interfere in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections), while the Foundation's chairman, Alexander Malkevich, has been sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury Department for his role in spreading disinformation as the former editor of the English-language "USA Really" website. (Associated Press, July 5, 2019)

### MOSCOW DENOUNCES "COLD WAR PROPAGANDA"

The Kremlin has seized on a new U.S. development initiative as a platform for its assertions that Washington is engaging in information warfare and deliberately sabotaging US-Russian relations. A statement posted on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs condemned a speech given by U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Mark Green, in which Green presented a new framework called "Countering Malign Kremlin Influence" (CMKI). The Russian Ministry derided CMKI as a "clumsily disguised aggressive offensive approach" harkening back to the Cold War era that counteracted the "constructive" meeting between Presidents Trump and Putin at the G20 Summit. The statement blamed other "powerful Washington officials [of] doing their best to thwart the normalization of Russia-US relations" by promoting global Russophobia and undercutting Russia's efforts to cooperate with the West. (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 6, 2019)

### DISASTER STRIKES SECRET UNDERSEA MISSION

Russia's navy suffered its most serious accident in nearly two decades last month when fourteen sailors died in a fire on board a nuclear-powered submarine. According to Captain Sergei Pavlov, who spoke at the victims' funeral, the men's sacrifice saved the lives of their fellow sailors and successfully kept the fire from spreading, preventing a likely "planetary catastrophe" had the conflagration reached the sub's reactor.

Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu also praised the heroism of the fourteen victims and confirmed that several survivors had been rescued. President Vladimir Putin subsequently awarded the nation's highest honor, the "Hero of Russia," to two of the dead, while elevating seven other posthumously to the rank of captain.

Otherwise, Russian officials have been loathe to discuss any other details about the vessel, claiming that such information is "absolutely classified." However, the sub was believed to be part of a secret deep-diving project known as "Losharik," dedicated to exploration of the seabed and surveillance of undersea communications and cables. (*Bloomberg*, July 8, 2019; *Navy Times*, July 3, 2019)