



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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RUSSIA'S WIDENING STAKE IN SYRIA

Moscow is flexing its political muscle in Syria through a number of administrative changes to the country's military posture. According to data obtained by the Lebanese journal *Al-Modon*, the number of Syrian forces under direct Russian command surpassed 140,000 as of July 2019, while an additional 650 high-ranking officers are undergoing military education in Russia in preparation for placement in key army and intelligence posts. Reportedly, Moscow also has Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's support in issuing instructions that will reshape the military units engaged in the conflict while minimizing Iranian influence. (*The Syrian Observer*, August 20, 2019)

FOREST FIRES STRAIN FEDERAL BUDGET

Massive forest fires raging across Siberia are damaging more than just the environment. The Russian government has spent at least \$106 million so far fighting this year's fires, which at their peak covered an area larger than three million hectares (a territory roughly the size of Belgium). Even this amount may be insufficient, however; environmentalists have blamed authorities for a sluggish response that has contributed to the severity of the fires, and warn that the true cost to the government will likely be much higher, as long-term damage to human and wildlife health along with soil conditions piles up down the road. (*The Moscow Times*, August 22, 2019)

NO EXPOSURE WARNING, NYONOKSA VICTIM DOCTORS CLAIM

Official secrecy surrounding the Nyonoksa test site explosion in early August may have directly endangered local residents, who were left largely to fend for themselves amid a dearth of guidance from authorities about the radiation released by the accident. Doctors who initially treated the explosion victims have complained publicly of the fact that they were given no warning that they might be exposed to radiation by interacting with the patients. In a subsequent examination, one doctor tested positive for traces of cesium-137 – a heavy byproduct of nuclear fission. (*The Moscow Times*, August 23, 2019)

FLOATING NUCLEAR POWER STATION SETS SAIL

Russia has launched its first floating nuclear power station, the *Akademik Lomonosov*, in a bid to bring power to some of its most isolated Arctic populations and off-shore facilities. On August 23rd, the *Lomonosov* set sail from the port of Murmansk and is scheduled to travel eastward along Russia's northern coast to Pevek – a journey of roughly 3,000 miles. Russia expects the facility to have a 40-year operating life and generate enough power with its two nuclear reactors to provide enough electricity for a town of 100,000. Environmental organizations, however, have protested the concept of a floating nuclear power station, warning that it is a "high-risk" proposition and that clean-up in the event of a disaster would be nearly impossible. (*BBC News*, August 23, 2019)

WHELAN DETENTION EXTENDED

The legal ordeal of Paul Whelan, a U.S. citizen currently languishing in a Russian jail, will not end any time soon. At the end of August, a Moscow court opted to extend Whelan's pre-trial detention for an additional two months, meaning his legal proceedings will not begin until the end of October at the earliest. Whelan was originally arrested back in December 2018 on charges of espionage, for which he could face a sentence of up to 20 years. The former U.S. Marine has called his arrest a politically motivated kidnapping and a "dog and pony show for the [Russian] media." He claims to be in poor physical condition as a result of rough treatment at the hands of the Russian authorities, but so far has been denied medical treatment. (Reuters, August 23, 2019)

OFFICIALS BELATEDLY COME CLEAN IN MISSILE TEST DISASTER

On August 26th, the Russian government finally acknowledged the nuclear character of the disaster that occurred earlier in the month at a far northern test site. The country's meteorological agency issued a statement identifying the isotopes found in Severodvinsk as strontium-91, barium-139, barium-140, and lanthanum-140 – all of which are byproducts of nuclear fission. As observers pointed to an increase in "misinformation and misdirection" from the government regarding the accident, Russia's envoy in Vienna cast blame on the United States, saying that the American withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty back in 2002 prompted the "development of weapons which we had to begin creating as one of the tit-for-tat-measures" that ultimately led to the Nyonoksa explosion. (*New York Times*, August 26, 2019)