



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2341

October 14, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; China; Iran; Israel; North Korea; Russia

### ST. PETERSBURG VOTERS CRY FOUL

When the ballots came in for Russia's September elections, many residents of St. Petersburg were unhappy with the results. Approximately 1,000 protestors gathered in the country's second-largest city on September 17th to condemn electoral irregularities, including alleged vote-buying and intimidation of observers, and the victory of incumbent mayor Alexander Beglov. One demonstrator called the rally a "cry of despair" against the ubiquity of such illegal tactics in the country's elections. (Associated Press, September 17, 2019)

### PUTIN PLAYS UP ISRAEL TIES

Vladimir Putin appears to be courting Israeli public opinion. In recent public remarks, the Russian president took pains to stress the strength of the Russian-Israeli relationship. At a recent Moscow conference held by a major Israeli fundraising organization, Putin told audience members that he considers Israel "a Russian-speaking country." He pointed to World War II and the Holocaust as evidence that the two countries are "united by common and often tragic pages in history." (*The Moscow Times*, September 18, 2019)

### NEW STUDY HIGHLIGHTS HARSH "JUSTICE" FOR MOSCOW PROTESTORS

How has the Kremlin dealt with the aftermath of last month's protests in Moscow? The Carnegie Moscow Center's Olga Romanova writes that the cases currently being prosecuted against the individuals detained at the September protests highlight new tactics in the Russian government's ongoing attempts to quash and quell dissent. In particular, Romanova highlights the authorities' unwillingness to respond to or investigate the brutal police tactics used against detained protestors, the refusal of judges to admit relevant video evidence of the incidents in question, and the decision to prosecute cases against protestors on more serious charges instead of as administrative violations, as has been typical in the past.

Romanova argues that the widespread backlash against the protestors' persecution, most visibly the case of actor Pavel Ustinov, is a sign that the harsh sentencing practices may actually swing public mood in support of the protestors. She also laments the lack of any real international interest in the Moscow protests, which she chalks up to "anti-Putinism fatigue" in the international community. (Carnegie Moscow Center, September 18, 2019)

### A SUDDEN POACHING SPAT WITH PYONGYANG

Diplomatic relations between Russia and North Korea experienced a setback in mid-September after Russian border patrol detained 161 North Korean sailors in the Sea of Japan. According to the state-run RIA news agency, border patrol officials accosted thirteen boats that were illegally fishing in Russian waters, a hunting ground habitually frequented by North Korean poachers. Russian officials have generally turned a blind eye to such activity, but this time the encounter escalated to a shootout, and multiple individuals were injured on both sides. As it is unclear whether the poachers were operating with Pyongyang's approval, the sailors' detention has provoked discomfort among Russian politicians, many of whom expressed reluctance to let the episode affect official relations between Moscow and Pyongyang. (*The National Interest*, September 19, 2019)

### THE CHINA/RUSSIA/IRAN AXIS MOBILIZES

After a series of missile strikes on Saudi oil facilities further aggravated tensions between the United States and Iran last month, the Iranian government turned to Moscow and Beijing for a public show of support. A week after the September 14th missile strikes, which Washington contends were orchestrated by Tehran, a senior Iranian defense official announced that Moscow and Beijing have agreed to participate in a high-level trilateral naval drill in international waters. While he did not announce a date for the joint exercises, General Ghadir Nezami Pour asserted that such exercises sometimes "seek political goals which show a kind of convergence between participants." Similarly, Chinese military scholars predicted that the drill, should it take place, would convincingly demonstrate Beijing's willingness to side with Tehran in the case of further escalation. (*South China Morning Post*, September 21, 2019)