



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2342

October 17, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Russia; Ukraine

THE KREMLIN'S WAR ON THE WEB

A uniquely Russian Internet, or "RuNet," is set to go live in November. According to ROSKOMNADZOR Chief Alexander Zharov, the federal communications regulator has begun installing the necessary equipment to bring RuNet online, and will begin large-scale "combat mode" testing in October. The new infrastructure was mandated by legislation passed earlier this year. It gives the Russian government the power to centralize the country's networks by creating an alternate domain name system, which will enable Russia's internet to disconnect from the rest of the web when its systems are "in danger." Russian officials claim this separation will help Russia defend against threats to its networks, but critics deride the plan as yet another way for the government to exert censorship and limit internet freedom. (*Forbes*, September 24, 2019)

PRIESTS DEFENDING PROTESTORS

More than 200 Orthodox priests from all over Russia have signed an open letter demanding justice in the trials of protestors detained last month. The letter calls on judicial officials to review the cases fairly, warning them against exploiting the legal system as a tool of repression and arguing that "you cannot build a society of free, loving people on intimidation." The letter was received warily by higher-level Orthodox officials, including Deputy Chair of Public Relations for the Church Vakhtang Kipshidze, who criticized the priests for acting independently. The Carnegie Moscow Center's Ksenia Luchenko calls the letter the first time that the Church's clergy "have taken collective action that was not sanctioned by the church authorities." She adds that the letter is all the more notable given how dependent the signatories are on Church leadership for their livelihood; she refers to priests as "one of the least protected social groups in contemporary Russia." (Carnegie Moscow Center, September 24, 2019)

MORE KREMLIN SUPPORT FOR MADURO

Russian President Vladimir Putin has offered yet another strong show of support for embattled Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro. Putin received Maduro in Moscow in late September, where he told the Venezuelan strongman that Russia supports his attempts to negotiate with factions of his domestic opposition – despite the fact that the primary group led by Juan Guaido has refused to participate in such a negotiation. Alluding to Guaido, Putin called the refusal to negotiate "irrational and harmful for the country and a threat to the welfare of the population." He also confirmed that Russia is "meeting its obligations" with regard to the military equipment it has sent to Maduro's forces, and that it plans to provide medical assistance to the country in the form of 1.5 million flu vaccines. (*The Moscow Times*, September 25, 2019)

MOSCOW'S MORATORIUM PROPOSAL DEAD ON ARRIVAL

With the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty now officially discarded, President Putin's latest arms control propositions are being met skeptically by his Western counterparts. Putin reportedly sent letters to European and NATO leaders in September suggesting a joint moratorium on the deployment of short and intermediate-range missiles in Europe. While confirming that Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg had indeed received Putin's letter, NATO Spokesperson Oana Lungescu was dismissive of the entire concept: "we have heard this proposal before, but this is not a credible offer, as it disregards the reality on the ground" – namely, that Russia had deployed its intermediate SSC-8 system long before the demise of the INF Treaty. (Itar-TASS, September 25, 2019)

NEW EVIDENCE IN EXILE'S ASSASSINATION

A newly released investigative report strongly implicates the Russian government in the murder of former Chechen separatist Zelimkhan Khangoshvili. The investigation into the background of Khangoshvili's killer was conducted by a joint team consisting of members from investigative watchdog Bellingcat, Russian investigative site *The Insider*, and Germany's *Der Spiegel* newspaper. The team used information from suspect Vadim Sokolov's tax files and passport applications to establish a definitive link between Sokolov and the Russian Ministry of Defense, providing "overwhelming evidence that the arrested assassin acted with the full support of the Russian state." The report's release has helped debunk other false leads and theories that spread in the wake of Khangoshvili's murder last month, including the speculation that his death was a contract hit ordered by an organized crime group. (*The Moscow Times*, September 27, 2019)

LAVROV STRIKES A DEFIANT POSE IN NEW YORK

When Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov arrived in New York for the 74th session of the UN General Assembly, he wasted little time on diplomatic niceties. Lavrov delivered a fiery speech before UN members in which he accused Western countries of hypocrisy in regard to the promotion of liberal values and castigated them for a perceived unwillingness to accept that their "privileged position" and "centuries-long dominance in world affairs" is coming to an end. He spoke just after a private meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during which the discussion reportedly ranged from arms control to regional issues concerning North Korea, Afghanistan, and Ukraine; the previous day, Pompeo had publicly accused Russia of deploying chlorine gas against Syrian rebels in contravention of its commitments under the Chemical Weapons Convention. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 27, 2019)