



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2343

October 22, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; Military Innovation; Science and Technology; China; Russia

### A FUROR OVER GENE EDITING

The high-profile case of a Russian scientist who intends to genetically modify a baby may force the question of gene-editing regulation to the top of President Vladimir Putin's agenda. Denis Rebrikov, a biochemist from Moscow, has announced his plan to use CRISPR gene-editing technology to prevent deafness in the fetus of a pregnant client, despite widespread concerns about the safety, legality, and morality of such a procedure. He plans to submit an application to the Russian Ministry of Health later this month. Rebrikov has argued fervently and publicly for Russia to take the lead in an imminent gene-editing race that he perceives as reminiscent of the Cold War. He called the question "completely analogous to developing an atomic bomb... can bad people use technology for bad purposes? Of course. But did ethical concerns stop the Soviet Union from doing so?"

However, Rebrikov's convictions have provoked both his domestic and international colleagues, who fear that he is ignoring outstanding questions and irreversible consequences of his intended experiment. His proposal is so controversial that a group of Russia's most prestigious scientists met privately with Maria Vorontsova, an endocrinologist said by the media to be Vladimir Putin's oldest daughter, in order to debate the merits and dangers of Rebrikov's plan. Vorontsova has not commented on the meeting, but individuals who were present report that she supported human gene editing but only in government state-run facilities and not in the private sector, and they hope that she will communicate their views to her father. Putin, for his part, has publicly asserted that gene editing will likely "determine the future of the whole world" and fears that its military uses could be "more terrible than a nuclear bomb." (*The Moscow Times*, September 29, 2019)

### INTIMIDATION AT THE POLLS

Amid the flurry of procedural irregularities and violations that marred Russia's recent elections, a new egregious claim has emerged in St. Petersburg. Independent journal *Meduza* reported that city officials actively recruited and paid off young members of local martial arts clubs to go to the polls and directly interfere in the electoral process. In the guise of election observers, the recruits are said to have verbally abused, threatened, and even assaulted actual observers, trying to run them off and prevent a proper observation of the vote. Diverse sources – including independent candidates, the coach of the recruited athletes, and even a parliament member – have corroborated the allegations. (*The Moscow Times*, October 1, 2019)

### RUSSIA-CHINA COLLABORATION ON MISSILE WARNING

Russian President Vladimir Putin has announced a fruitful - and lucrative - area of future military cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. Speaking at an international conference in Sochi earlier this month, Putin declared that Russia plans to help China develop its own missile attack warning system. During his remarks, Putin emphasized the fact that currently only the United States and Russia possess these capabilities. The president's announcement was later confirmed by Sergei Boyev, director general of weapons manufacturer Vypel, although Boyev offered no additional details as to when the system would be finalized. Military analysts described the collaboration as another way for Russia to assert its great power status and tighten its military bond with China, while offering both countries improved advanced warning capabilities in the South Pacific and Indian Ocean. (*CBS News*, October 4, 2019)

### TRACKING PROTESTORS WITH SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGY

A new lawsuit calling for a moratorium on the use of facial recognition technology in Russia is putting a tech-focused lens on the Russian government's attempts to deter and suppress dissent. The lawsuit was filed against the Moscow city government by Alyona Popova, a Moscow lawyer and activist arrested on illegal protesting charges at a rally last year. Popova claims that law enforcement used the technology in question illegally to identify and convict her. To gather support for her objective – a moratorium on the technology until "full transparency about their use and safety for citizens is ensured" – Popova created an online petition and is working with monitoring non-profit ROSKOMSVOBODA, which has publicly backed her suit. Critics fear that Russia's widespread and unregulated use of this technology, which expanded rapidly after security concerns during the 2018 World Cup, may help create a "total surveillance network" that violates constitutional rights to privacy. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, October 7, 2019)

## **SECRET MILITARY INTEL UNIT EXPOSED**

Western security officials recently confirmed that, for at least a decade, a top-secret unit of Russian military intelligence has been devoted to the mission of foreign subterfuge, epitomizing Vladimir Putin's hybrid warfare approach to challenging his adversaries. The *New York Times* reported in October that Unit 29155, part of Russian military intelligence agency GRU, is an elite unit commanded by Major General Andrei Averyanov, a highly decorated veteran of the Chechen wars. The unit's tactics include "subversion, sabotage, and assassination," and its operatives are now definitively linked to multiple acts of aggression across Europe, including the attempted poisoning of a Bulgarian arms dealer in 2015, the failed coup plot in Montenegro in 2016, and the Novichok assassination attempt in the UK in 2018. When asked to comment on the revelations, one U.S. embassy official in Moscow remarked that "I think we had forgotten how organically ruthless the Russians could be." (*New York Times*, October 8, 2019)