



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2347

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**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Caucasus; Middle East ; Russia

### PUTIN'S TRUST PROBLEM

While Russians overall approve of their president, new polling data suggests that doesn't necessarily mean they trust him. According to results published by the independent Levada Center, the percentage of Russians who trust the president is slowly declining, dipping for the first time below 40 percent in September 2019. However, these results are more favorable than those concerning other major political figures in Russia: the center's report contrasted Putin's 39 percent trust rating to the 14 percent received by both his defense and foreign ministers, as well as the mere 3 percent recorded for opposition leader Alexei Navalny. The data also distinguishes between "trust" and popularity – 68 percent of respondents approved of Putin and his personal performance as president. This popularity far outweighs that of the Russian government overall (43 percent approval), Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (38 percent), and the lower house of Russia's parliament, the Duma (40 percent). (*BNE Intellinews*, October 18, 2019)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Given the effect of Russia's increasingly authoritarian political climate on pollsters and respondents alike, the results of public opinion surveys in Russia should be viewed with some caution.]

### MOSCOW INCHES AWAY FROM THE LAWS OF WAR...

Russian President Vladimir Putin has backed out of a key part of the Geneva Conventions, a seminal series of treaties and protocols that govern the protection of human rights during times of conflict. In an October 16th letter to the speaker of the Duma, Putin revoked his country's adherence to Additional Protocol I, which deals with the protection of war crimes victims in international conflicts and is implemented by an international commission that investigates such crimes. While sparse on details, Putin's letter berates the commission for "effectively fail[ing] to carry out its functions since 1991" and forecasts an increased likelihood of states abusing the convention's powers. For now, Russia – which has been blamed for multiple civilian deaths during the Syrian conflict and its war with Georgia – remains a signatory to the rest of the Conventions. (Reuters, October 20, 2019)

### ...AND DOUBLES DOWN ON ARCTIC CLAIMS

Top Russian officials are claiming that a new body of evidence – the fruit of decades of research and analysis – firmly establishes Russia's territorial rights in the Arctic. The announcement marks a new phase in Russia's efforts to capture a controlling stake in the region. The country has long claimed roughly 1.2 million square kilometers of the Arctic, parts of which conflict with the claims of Canada and Denmark. However, for nearly two decades, Russia's arguments have been rejected by the independent UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf (CLCS) on the grounds of insufficient evidence. However, in late October, Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov asserted publicly that new technology has enabled a highly accurate mapping of the shelf's underwater landscape that corroborates Russia's claims. Borisov added that the collection of data was formally resubmitted to the CLCS at the end of the summer for further adjudication. (*Barents Observer*, October 21, 2019)

### RUSSIAN ELECTION INTERFERENCE... IN BOLIVIA

Russian political consultants with ties to the country's nuclear agency, ROSATOM, have been accused of engaging in interference in Bolivia's most recent elections. Bolivian strongman Evo Morales has long courted Russian business and acted as a political ally of the Kremlin in the Western Hemisphere. Thus, when early polling suggested that he would lose his bid for a fourth term, the team of Russian consultants came to his rescue. Upon arriving in La Paz, the Russians allegedly helped devise a strategy for interference dominated by social media tactics designed to discredit Morales's opponents and critics. According to Russian news site Proekt, which first uncovered the effort, close Putin ally and former ROSATOM director Sergei Kiriyenko oversaw the campaign from the Russian government's side. (*The Moscow Times*, October 23, 2019)