



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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Related Categories: Arms Control and Proliferation; Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Warfare; Africa; Latin America; Russia

MOSCOW THROWS CARACAS A FINANCIAL LIFELINE

As Venezuela continues to stagger under the weight of Western sanctions, newly-uncovered data shows that Russia has funneled hundreds of millions of dollars to Caracas to keep the regime of strongman Nicolas Maduro afloat. Customs records compiled by *Bloomberg* show that, from May 2018 through April 2019, six shipments of hard currency were sent to Banes, Venezuela's development bank, by the Russian state-owned GAZPROM energy conglomerate and by joint Russian-Venezuelan venture Evrofinance Mosnarbank. The shipments, totaling \$315 million in a combination of Euros and dollars, have helped the fragile Maduro administration shield itself from the impact of sanctions, providing much-needed hard currency and a way to hide its transactions from international scrutiny. When questioned, Banes officials confirmed receipt of the currency shipments, but provided no further comment. (*Bloomberg*, November 1, 2019)

ANOTHER STEP TOWARD A RUSSIAN INTERNET

Russia's controversial "sovereign internet" law entered into force at the beginning of November. The measure, signed by President Vladimir Putin earlier this year, gives the Kremlin an ominous degree of power over its citizens' Internet usage by setting up a parallel but isolated Russian domain system. However, enacting the law is proving to be a protracted process; 19 separate bylaws remain to be passed, and officials continue to grapple with questions of feasibility and ballooning costs associated with the project. Moreover, early tests of the system have failed, and past experience has shown that government bans and censorship online are difficult to fully enforce. Independent estimates, meanwhile, predict that the necessary infrastructure will end up costing the Kremlin more than \$2 billion per year. Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch and other monitoring organizations continue to decry the threat the new law poses to freedom of speech and information in Russia. (*Financial Times*, November 1, 2019)

RUSSIAN GUNS TURNING THE TIDE IN TRIPOLI

Since September, Moscow has sent scores of professional mercenaries to Libya to shore up the military campaign of guerrilla leader Khalifa Haftar in the bloody contest for the country's presidency. In a ground war described as "amateurish," the well-equipped Russian fighters and snipers backing Haftar's forces stand out; fighters from opposing militias identify those killed by Russian snipers by their special hollow-tipped bullets, which leave no exit wounds – just like those used by similar paramilitary troops in Syria and eastern Ukraine. The Kremlin's decision to double down on Haftar appears to be provoked in part by growing U.S. disengagement from the Libyan conflict, and from the tempting opportunity to advance their own influence in northern Africa.

Snipers, moreover, are only one part of the effort. Russia has also aided Haftar's forces with advanced fighter jets, precision guided missile and artillery strikes, technical support, and millions of dollars in freshly printed Libyan bank notes. General Osama al-Juwaili, leader of the forces fighting against Haftar on behalf of the UN-recognized government in Tripoli, has declared: "It's very clear that Russia is going all in on this conflict." (*New York Times*, November 5, 2019)

A RUSSIAN WIKIPEDIA?

Wikipedia may find itself the next target of President Vladimir Putin's desire to devise a parallel Internet experience for Russian citizens. Putin recently told attendees at a Kremlin meeting on the future of the Russian language that it would be "better to replace [Wikipedia] with the new Big Russian Encyclopedia in electronic form." The Russian government has already devised a three-year plan to create a more "reliable" Russian version of the free online reference site, and has budgeted roughly 1.7 billion rubles (roughly \$26 million) for the effort. (London *Guardian*, November 5, 2019)

GOODBYE TO OPEN SKIES?

Russian officials are telegraphing their readiness to retaliate if the United States decides to withdraw from one of the last remaining major arms control treaties in force between the two countries. Last month, rumors began circulating that the White House might move to withdraw the U.S. from the Open Skies Treaty, an agreement signed in 2002 by more than 30 countries that allows signatories to conduct short-notice unarmed aerial surveillance over each other's territories for the purposes of confidence-building and stability. When asked by the media if Russia was prepared for a U.S. departure from Open Skies, Vladimir Ermakov, head of the Russian Foreign Ministry's arms control and nonproliferation department, responded, "Of course. We've got everything ready. You'll find out." (Reuters, November 7, 2019)