



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2355

December 19, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Intelligence and Counterintelligence; International Economics and Trade; China; Middle East; Russia

NEW BRIDGE TO LINK RUSSIA, CHINA

The construction of a new bridge across the Amur River portends a boon for Sino-Russian cooperation and commerce. The \$300 million project, which links Russia's far eastern city of Blagoveschensk and Heihe in China's northeast, required the construction of 12.5 miles of new roads and a 3,500 foot span across the river below. Its completion was announced at the end of November, when Vasily Orlov, the Amur regional governor, heralded the bridge as "a new international transport corridor... [that] will allow us to fully reach our transit potential." Once it opens in spring 2020, after the addition of new customs and logistics terminals, the Amur River crossing point will enable a significant increase in freight traffic and trade in agricultural products between the two great power neighbors. The bridge is the latest joint Sino-Russian effort in a bilateral relationship that has been gradually warming ever since Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea kicked off a precipitous decline in Moscow's relations with the West. (Reuters, November 29, 2019)

SPY SHIP HIDING OFF U.S. COAST?

A special purpose Russian intelligence ship appeared briefly in the Caribbean in November before vanishing, raising questions about its location and the purpose of its mission so close to the United States. The *Yantar*, a vessel that specializes in finding and tracking objects on the seabed, was observed briefly on open-source tracking platforms making port calls in Trinidad on November 8th and November 28th, but disappeared during the intervening weeks. Its whereabouts remain unknown, leading analysts to believe that the *Yantar's* crew has turned off its AIS broadcasting system to avoid detection. Given its history of surveillance near the vital communications cables that traverse the bottom of the Atlantic, analysts believe it likely that the *Yantar* remains somewhere off the coast of the United States, engaged in a similar mission. In the past, the vessel, which carries two submersibles with cable cutting equipment, has raised suspicions that Russia is building up its "seabed warfare" capabilities to attack underwater infrastructure in a hypothetical conflict, thus disabling military activity above the surface. (*Forbes*, December 1, 2019)

A HOSTILE CLIMATE FOR BUSINESS

A new poll by PricewaterhouseCoopers and Moscow's NAFI Analytic Center paints a grim picture that contradicts all the Kremlin's positive assertions about the state of the business climate in Russia. The survey compared responses from two generations of entrepreneurs in Moscow: those born between 1957 and 1963, who conducted business in the early 1990s, and those born between 1980 and 1991 who are currently active. Across the board, their responses suggested that the chaotic years of the early post-Soviet period were preferable to business conditions under President Vladimir Putin. The chief complaints among the respondents included rising energy prices, increased corruption, falling purchasing power, excessive regulation, and declining skills among potential employees. (*Window on Eurasia*, December 1, 2019)

SUMMER AIRSTRIKES TARGETED SYRIAN CIVILIANS

New evidence has emerged that Russian forces were responsible for bombing two Syrian compounds full of displaced civilians earlier this summer. The attacks took place in Maarat Al-Numan and Hass, two towns in Idlib province, and Russia previously denied any responsibility for the airstrikes that killed more than 50 people. However, reporters for the *New York Times* used videos of the attacks, interviews with witnesses, and – most damningly – flight logs and audio recordings of the pilots' radio transmissions to build the case that Russian planes were indeed responsible for deliberately targeting the civilians. The investigators allege that "it's all part of a strategy to break the will of the people, force them to flee, and to help the Syrian government retake the last opposition stronghold." (*The Moscow Times*, December 2, 2019)

A BROADER FOREIGN AGENTS LAW

One of Russia's more controversial laws has just received a significant expansion in its purview. The "foreign agent law," passed in 2012, requires non-profit organizations to register with the Justice Ministry and identify themselves as foreign agents in all published materials if they accept foreign funding – or else face legal consequences. Now, an amendment signed by President Putin on December 2nd applies this language to individuals as well: anyone who publishes "printed, audio, audiovisual, or other reports and materials" while receiving any source of foreign income must register with the government, file specific financial reports, and carry the stigmatized label of a "foreign agent."

Human rights organizations protested the law's expansion, voicing fears that its deliberate vagueness will be exploited to suppress free speech and to target the Kremlin's most vocal opponents, as has occurred with non-profits who have run afoul of Moscow's policies since the original law's passage. Russian lawmakers countered that the expansion is only a fair response to the foreign agent laws on the books in other countries, such as the one used by the United States to deport Maria Butina, a Russian student who was convicted last year of conspiring to act as an unregistered foreign agent while living in Washington. (*New York Times*, December 2, 2019)

NEGOTIATIONS STALL ON RUSSIAN-BELARUSIAN INTEGRATION

December 2019 marks the 20th anniversary of the Union State Treaty, in which Russia and Belarus pledged to form an integrated supranational union. However, over the last two decades, little progress has been made toward that objective, and the most recent summit between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Belarusian counterpart, Alexander Lukashenko, continued the trend. A week prior to the summit, Belarus' ambassador to Russia told reporters that "we're currently working on creating a single parliament and government," prompting speculation and controversy among those who view the concept of integration as a way that President Putin might dodge the term limits that bar him from seeking office again in 2024. Many Belarusians also fear that their country would be swallowed up by Russia's comparative demographic and economic might in any integrated union, and dozens of activists turned out in Minsk to protest the talks. However, despite the suspenseful lead-up, the five-hour meeting in Sochi between the two leaders on December 7th ended fruitlessly. The question of energy prices reportedly was a chief sticking point, with Minsk refusing to pay the higher prices for Russian oil that Moscow appears to be demanding as a condition of the union. Lukashenko and Putin will meet again on December 20th for another round of negotiations. (*The Moscow Times*, December 2, 2019; *The Moscow Times*, December 8, 2019)