



## RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2354

December 17, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

**Related Categories:** Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; Missile Defense; Russia; Ukraine

### PASSPORTS LINK GRU AGENTS TO UNSOLVED CRIMES

Investigative outlet Bellingcat has established that eight members of an elite GRU unit were in Bulgaria at the precise time of a 2015 poisoning attack on local arms dealer Emilian Gebrev. Gebrev, who survived the attack, had long been targeted by his rivals, and Bellingcat asserts that "in the absence of logical alternative explanations, Gebrev's own hypothesis that he may have been targeted based on false information fed by competitors to the Kremlin, stands out as the most plausible scenario."

Chief suspect Denis Sergeyev and his fellow agents listed their real birthdates on the falsified documents they used to travel to Bulgaria, enabling Bellingcat to identify the potential link to Gebrev's poisoning. According to Bellingcat, Sergeyev and his fellow agents are members of GRU Unit 29155, an elite overseas unit of the military intelligence agency allegedly running Russia's covert destabilization operations in Europe. Sergeyev's likely role in Gebrev's poisoning has been corroborated by Bulgaria's chief prosecutor, and he is believed to have played a role in both the 2018 Salisbury attack on Sergei Skripal and his daughter, as well as in the Russian election interference campaign during Spain's 2017 referendum on Catalan independence. (*The Moscow Times*, November 25, 2019)

### A BREWING EMIGRATION CRISIS?

Russia's summer of unrest may have driven dissatisfaction among its younger citizens to a breaking point. According to the latest poll conducted by the independent Levada Center, the desire to emigrate has spiked among Russia's younger demographics to its highest level yet, with more than 50 percent of respondents between the ages of 18 and 24 reporting a desire to leave the country. The figure represents a substantial increase over 2014, when only 20 percent of that same demographic expressed a desire to emigrate. The most common driving factors included economic uncertainty and fear about the future their children would have, as well as disapproval of current policies and a lack of quality medical care. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, November 26, 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.]

### U.S. OFFICIALS INSPECT PUTIN'S SUPERWEAPON

For the first time, Russia has allowed American weapons inspectors access to the *Avangard*, a hypersonic nuclear missile that President Vladimir Putin has flaunted as "invulnerable" to U.S. missile defenses. The inspection, which involved a two-day site visit and a demonstration of the platform, took place under the auspices of the New Start treaty, the last verifiable arms control treaty in force between the two nations that is set to expire in 2021. Despite a number of problems and recent accidents that have plagued the weapon's development, the Kremlin maintains that the *Avangard* will be ready to deploy by the end of this year. (*Newsweek*, November 26, 2019)

### ANOTHER INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST ATTACKED

The head of an independent Russian investigative journalism group has labeled himself a new member of the "green brotherhood" after an anonymous attack left him stained with a bright green dye. Prior to his attack, Ruslan Leviev, the founder of the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT), had received anonymous threats for his organization's open-source efforts to shed light on covert activity by the Russian military, paramilitary, and intelligence communities. In a November Facebook post, Leviev describes how he was approached by an unknown assailant who punched him and doused him with "zelyonka," an antiseptic dye that has become the non-lethal weapon of choice for those trying to intimidate Kremlin critics over the past decade. Leviev declined to formally report this attack to the police since he thought doing so would be "pointless." (*Meduza*, November 27, 2019)

## **APPLE APPEASES KREMLIN WITH NEW CRIMEA POLICY**

Although the international community still refuses to recognize Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, tech giant Apple has succumbed to the pressure to toe Moscow's party line in order to preserve its coveted space in the Russian market. Starting this month, any Apple app viewed on devices in Russia will show the peninsula as part of Russia, not Ukraine (Crimea will remain Ukrainian when viewed on devices outside of Russia). Apple's decision is the outcome of months of testy negotiations with the Duma over the company's "inaccurate maps." Other technology companies, including Google and Yandex, have adopted similar policies vis-à-vis Crimea after being subjected to coercion from the Russian government. Multiple Russian lawmakers praised Apple's decision, while Ukrainian government officials vocally protested it as a surrender, warning that "global politics is not [Apple's] strong suit." (*New York Times*, November 28, 2019)