



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

# Russia Reform Monitor No. 2353

December 13, 2019 **Margot van Loon**

**Related Categories:** Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; International Economics and Trade; NATO; Corruption; SPACE; Middle East; Russia; Ukraine

## A STEP FORWARD FOR MOSCOW IN NORTHERN SYRIA

In the wake of the October withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria, Russia's military is taking advantage of abandoned American bases in the country. On November 17th, Russian troops formally took control of Kobani Air Base, which had served as the primary logistical hub for U.S. forces dedicated to the anti-ISIS mission until their repositioning. Russian media filmed the takeover, which was staged to look like a combat operation despite the fact that no one remained behind to engage or oppose them. With the Kobani Air Base firmly in Russian hands, Moscow's control along the Syrian-Turkish border has increased significantly. (CBS News, November 17, 2019)

## UKRAINIAN SHIPS RETURNED

Russia has agreed to release two Ukrainian gunboats and a tugboat that it has held since a startling naval confrontation last year off the coast of Crimea. The three Ukrainian vessels had been underway from Odessa to Mariupol when they were intercepted by a group of Russian ships in the Kerch Strait on November 25, 2018. The Russian sailors opened fire, ultimately capturing the Ukrainian ships and their crews. In the year since the incident, Moscow has maintained that the vessels were transiting Russian waters illegally, despite a 2003 bilateral treaty guaranteeing both nations free access to the Strait and the surrounding Sea of Azov. Several months passed before the imprisoned sailors were released. Now, Moscow's latest decision to close the incident by returning the vessels coincides with the public announcement that President Vladimir Putin will meet for the first time with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelinsky. The timing has prompted analysts to hail the ships' return as a sign of potential de-escalation between Moscow and Kyiv. (BBC, November 18, 2019)

## VOSTOCHNY FRAUD A THORN IN PUTIN'S SIDE

Ongoing legal action against officials involved in the Vostochny space center continues to tarnish the lofty aspirations surrounding Russia's first civilian site for commercial space missions. The country's federal investigative committee, SK Rossii, recently confirmed that to date, 58 officials involved in the project have been convicted of fraud and abuse of office, with twelve additional cases in the pipeline. These individuals perpetrated massive embezzlement through cost inflation and falsification, making off with at least 11 billion stolen rubles (roughly \$170,000), of which only 3.5 billion has been recovered to date.

The project, under the oversight of ROSKOSMOS head Dmitry Rogozin, has been a matter of national pride and a personal priority of Vladimir Putin's, who reportedly vented his fury over the graft at a government meeting in mid-November. Russia expert Mark Galeotti blames Vostochny's problems on a lack of financial transparency in the Russian government and notes the challenges it creates for Putin: "How can you deal with it without declaring war on your own elite? He's not prepared to do that. This dependency on mega-projects almost invariably creates massive opportunities for embezzlement." (BBC, November 19, 2019)

## RUSSIA'S MILITARY DECISIONMAKING SET TO OUTSTRIP NATO'S

An automated command and control (C2) system under development by the Russian Ministry of Defense is breaking new ground in military decision-making. The new system, which was first tested during the country's annual military exercises in September, allows a human user to input factors and conditions for a particular mission (for example, prioritizing time or resources required), and then the artificial intelligence-enabled system analyzes the information and generates a plan to achieve the desired outcome, providing for a higher degree of speed and accuracy in battlefield decision-making by automating nearly all of the manual planning involved. The Jamestown Foundation confirmed that Russia's new system renders its military decision-making process capabilities "well beyond the existing standards and capacities of [NATO] Alliance standards." (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, November 21, 2019)

## **THE KREMLIN TIGHTENS ITS GRIP ON RUSSIAN TECH**

A new technology law passed by the Russian parliament and signed by President Putin at the end of November is driving fears that the Kremlin has just secured another way to spy on its citizens. Once the law comes into force in July 2020, all devices sold in Russia (including smartphones, computers, and smart televisions) must come pre-installed with Russian software, functionally banning foreign alternatives unless they include Russian-made alternatives along with their normal software package. The bill's authors in the Duma framed their intent as giving Russian customers "the right to choose" a domestic alternative in their technology purchases. But industry associations predict that the law will prove to be either unwieldy (if incompatible software drives foreign sellers from the market) or prone to abuse, particularly given the recent passage of other onerous laws that strengthen the Russian government's control over the country's online presence. (*BBC*, November 21, 2019)