



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

Russia Reform Monitor No. 2359

January 13, 2020 **Margot van Loon**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Economic Sanctions; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; China; North Korea; Russia

NO BREAKTHROUGH AFTER LAVROV VISIT

After a recent visit by Russia's top diplomat to the United States, the Kremlin remained circumspect. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov traveled to Washington in December, where he met separately with President Donald Trump and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. Both the White House and the State Department subsequently stated that Lavrov had been warned against any Russian meddling in the upcoming U.S. presidential elections. Lavrov, for his part, undercut these comments and denied that the issue of election interference had been raised. Meanwhile, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov acknowledged that the Oval Office meeting with Trump was symbolically constructive, but that the U.S.-Russian relationship was "in such a profound crisis that even an important visit by such a heavyweight minister as Lavrov cannot change the trend or change the sign from minus to plus... I don't think there are grounds for any optimism." (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, December 15, 2019)

MOSCOW BACKS BREATHING ROOM FOR PYONGYANG

With progress on the problem of North Korea seemingly stalled, Russia has joined China in moving to relax the tranche of international sanctions designed to pressure Pyongyang into renouncing its nuclear weapons. On December 17th, delegates from Moscow and Beijing introduced a draft resolution at the United Nations Security Council that would lift the current ban on North Korean export of statues, seafood, and textiles, as well as restrictions on the ability of North Koreans to work abroad, and on inter-Korean infrastructure cooperation. If the ban is lifted, North Korea stands to reap hundreds of millions of dollars in profit from these affected industries. Russia's UN Ambassador, Vassily Nebenzia, defended the draft resolution as a way of reviving dialogue and trust that pertains solely to humanitarian issues, with no bearing on Pyongyang's nuclear program.

In short order, the Russian and Chinese delegations convened two rounds of informal negotiations on their proposal, but support remained weak among other nations, particularly the United States, United Kingdom, and France – all of whom remain resolute that sanctions should not be lifted until North Korea agrees to abandon its nuclear and missile testing. Anonymous diplomats expressed their suspicions that Pyongyang had been permitted to coordinate on the resolution prior to its introduction, and relayed concern that the unified front of the Council would be shattered if Moscow and Beijing successfully bring their proposal to a vote. (*The Moscow Times*, December 17, 2019; Reuters, December 29, 2019)

REGIONAL HIV CRISIS OFFERS DRUG RUNNERS AN OPPORTUNITY

Russian authorities recently interdicted nearly 1.2 metric tons of illicit opioids, prompting a major new drug trafficking inquiry. The bust at Moscow's Vnukovo Airport on December 6th resulted in the seizure of methadone that, gone unnoticed, would have fetched nearly \$96 million on the black market. The shipment was part of an HIV response program run by the United Nations in Tajikistan that seeks to provide methadone to intravenous drug users, a tactic shown to reduce the risk of HIV transmission. A UN Development Program spokesman confirmed that the methadone shipment had been mislabeled, allowing it to be diverted from its intended destination. The Russian Federal Customs Service has opened an investigation; if caught, those responsible would face up to life in prison for smuggling, a major offense under Russian law. (*The Moscow Times*, December 18, 2019)

PUTIN'S CONSTITUTIONAL PLANS

A recent comment to the press by Vladimir Putin has set off a firestorm of speculation about how Russia's president might seek to preserve his power in the face of constitutional limits. Russia's constitution currently prohibits any president from serving more than two consecutive terms in office, which means that Putin must leave the post when his six-year term ends in 2024. When asked about the term limits clause, Putin acknowledged that its language "troubles some of our political analysts and public figures. Well, maybe it could be removed." The comment provoked mixed responses from Russia's chief political analysts; some downplayed the significance of the comment, pointing to other Putin statements explicitly denying interest in another presidential term, while others saw a confirmation that he intends to remain at Russia's helm indefinitely and called constitutional change "inevitable." However, there was broad agreement that "nobody believes in a final departure," and that – constitutional change or not – Putin would find a way to remain at the center of Russian politics. (*The Moscow Times*, December 20, 2019)

PRISON NIGHTMARE CONTINUES FOR ISRAELI-AMERICAN TOURIST

An Israeli-American woman remains trapped in the Russian penal system after her attempt to appeal harsh sentencing was rejected by a Moscow court. Naama Issachar was arrested in April 2019 while transiting through a Moscow airport after authorities discovered 9.6 grams of cannabis in her luggage. She was sentenced in October to seven-and-a-half years in prison on charges of drug smuggling. At her unsuccessful December 20th appeal, she told the court "I've been behind bars for nearly nine months in an unknown, alien country deprived of the most basic rights and needs." Indeed, after the judge denied her appeal, Issachar was moved without explanation to a remote prison facility and held there without proper winter clothes or her personal possessions, according to the Israeli consul-general in Russia. Although she was later returned to Moscow, Issachar's ordeal continues to cause high-level diplomatic friction between the Israeli and Russian governments, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calling repeatedly on Vladimir Putin to pardon the woman. (*The Moscow Times*, December 20, 2019; *The Times of Israel*, January 1, 2019)