



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

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

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IN MAJOR ADDRESS, PUTIN FOCUSES ON ADVANCED TECHNOLOGIES...

In his annual State of the Nation address to parliament, Russian President Vladimir Putin made a concerted call for "breakthroughs" in artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies. Alluding to the military's recent deployment of the country's first hypersonic weapons system, Putin expressed his confidence that Russia could achieve similar victories in these fields "as in the defense sphere." He proposed an incentive system to drive domestic scientists to these areas while also creating "megascience" infrastructure and institutions to support them. (*Itar-TASS*, January 15, 2020)

...AND ANNOUNCES A CABINET SHAKEUP...

In a move that shocked even the most astute observers of Russian policy, President Putin also used his January 15th address to the nation to announce a slew of constitutional changes. Among other things, these changes strengthen the powers of the State Duma, and do so at the expense of the Russian presidency. Additionally, Putin announced that his longtime ally and current Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev would resign, as would the entire Russian cabinet. In Medvedev's stead, Putin named Mikhail Mishustin, who up until the announcement had led Russia's Federal Tax Service, as the country's new Prime Minister. Mishustin's appointment was promptly confirmed by the Duma, which unanimously voted to approve the new premier. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 15, 2020; *The Moscow Times*, January 16, 2020)

...AS WELL AS SIGNIFICANT CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES

President Putin's January 15th address served two main functions; to announce the dismissal of Prime Minister Medvedev and the entire Russian cabinet, as well as to lay the groundwork for a set of proposed changes to Russia's 1993 constitution, the country's first since the collapse of communism. The changes affect branch relations within the government, candidate eligibility for political office in Russia, and the government's responsibility to provide social welfare and equity. Viewed collectively, the constitutional amendments weaken the Russian president by limiting the office to two terms (President Putin famously served a total of four terms, with a stint as Prime Minister sandwiched in the middle), transferring the power to appoint the Prime Minister and other ministers from the president to the State Duma (lower house of parliament), and allowing constitutional courts to weigh in on legislation before presidents can sign them into law.

The proposed changes also put strict restrictions on those who can run for or hold political office. Legislators and ministers may not hold foreign citizenship or residency, under the new changes. The same restriction applies to candidates for president, in addition to a new 25-year requirement on Russian residency. Additionally, the proposal aims at improving social welfare and equity in Russia, pegging minimum wage to the poverty line, as well as adjusting pensions to inflation on an annual basis. The widespread 2018 demonstrations that took place after the Putin government announced hikes in the national pension age were likely a driver at propelling this last change. (*The Moscow Times*, January 16, 2020)

RUSSIA'S CYBER WARRIORS TAKE ON UKRAINE

The intelligence service of the Russian military, the GRU, has been responsible for conducting cyber-attacks on a variety of political targets in Ukraine over the past several months, according to a new report by American cybersecurity firm Area 1 Security. Among the targets is Burisma Holdings, the Ukrainian energy company at the center of President Trump's impeachment fight in the United States. Hunter Biden famously served on the board of Burisma while his father served as Vice President, raising questions over his role as well as the events that led up to the dismissal of Ukrainian General Prosecutor Viktor Shokin.

Many view the hack as a Russian attempt to meddle in the upcoming 2020 U.S. presidential election, following an influence campaign in 2016 that has been the subject of multiple U.S. intelligence and congressional inquiries. The method reportedly used on Burisma, phishing, was also used to steal information from the DNC and disseminate it through WikiLeaks. Area 1 Security has previously reported that the GRU engaged in a similar phishing campaign against Kwartal 95, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky's media organization from his time as a comedian and actor. (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, January 14, 2020)