BOMB THREATS DISRUPT DAILY LIVING
A persistent state of panic has gripped Moscow and other major Russian cities as a result of a series of bomb threats that have been called in across the country since late November. Public spaces such as metro stations, shopping malls, and even schools have all been identified as targets on the calls. Over a million residents have had their daily lives impacted in Moscow alone, as security forces have painstakingly closed off and searched suspected areas. Not a single bomb has been found, however, and residents' patience is now running low. Russian state-run media outlets have remained tight-lipped throughout the ordeal, only reporting on two incidents that took place in the Russian Far East, over three thousand miles from Moscow. Unable to express their frustration to the government through official channels, Russians have been utilizing social media to make their displeasure known and keep each other informed about developments. For their part, Russian authorities still don't know who is behind the calls, or where they are originating. (BBC News, January 20, 2020)

EXPERT: PUTIN'S FERTILITY PLANS INEFFECTIVE
Anatoly Vishnevsky, an expert on demography at the prestigious Higher School of Economics in Moscow, is not convinced that President Putin's newly-proposed plan to reverse Russia's demographic decline is workable - or sufficient. In a recent interview with Novaya Gazeta, Vishnevsky laid out a damning analysis of the Putin plan. Putin's new policy, he noted, calls for the allocation of 500 billion Rubles ($33.4 million) for programs that raise the level of financial support received by families with children, as well as an additional stipend for families with children between the ages of 3 and 7 whose income falls below the poverty line. But Vishnevsky is skeptical about whether the new stipends will have the desired effect of stimulating greater childbirth - and instead argues the money would be better spent on parents who have the material and financial means to have additional children, but stop at only one.

Vishnevsky also criticized the target birthrate outlined by Putin (1.7) as being wholly insufficient, because it falls below the 2.1 fertility rate necessary for a country to maintain a stable population. He also criticized the government's preoccupation with low birthrates, which he sees as a symptom of the much larger issue of poverty in Russia. In Vishnevsky's view, economic factors, not government handouts, will help to alleviate poverty and raise the quality of life. As it stands, however, Vishnevsky remains convinced that fertility and birthrates will not improve as a result of Putin's proposal. (Novaya Gazeta, January 17, 2020)

THE NEW (AND OLD) FACES OF RUSSIAN POWER
Just a week after President Putin announced major personnel and constitutional changes, the dust has begun to settle - and the immediate effects of Putin's plans are beginning to be seen. Within the Russian cabinet, five ministers have replaced, most notable among them Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev (who has been replaced by former tax official Mikhail Mishustin). But other changes are also afoot; Olga Lubimova, the former head of the Cinematography Department at the Ministry of Culture, has been appointed to head the entire Ministry, while Konstantin Chuychenko, Medvedev's former classmate and understudy in the Prime Minister's office, has been appointed Minister of Justice. Six members of the previous cabinet held onto their seats, among them Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, and Energy Secretary Alexander Novak. (The Moscow Times, January 22, 2020)

RUSSIA FAILS TO EXPEL NORTH KOREAN WORKERS BY DEADLINE
In 2017, the United Nations gave countries utilizing North Korean labor two years (until December 2019) to send those workers home. Yet, over a month after that deadline passed, at least 1,000 North Korean workers remain in Russia. The Russian Foreign Ministry asserts that Russia is complying with the mandate, and has blamed the delay in repatriating the workers on logistical obstacles - in particular, the fact that only two flights go from Moscow to North Korea each week. According to the ministry, the presence of the workers in Russia while they await repatriation isn't a problem, because their work visas have already expired and they cannot legally be employed in Russia.

Last year, Russia issued over 16,000 tourist and 10,000 student visas to North Koreans - a five-fold increase over 2018 levels. Some experts say that the surge is indicative of an effort by the Russian government to circumvent sanctions by utilizing alternate visa classifications to enter the country. North Korean policy also undoubtedly plays a part; Pyongyang is notorious for sending workers abroad to generate revenue for the central government in the form of hard currency. (Reuters, January 23, 2020)