



RUSSIA REFORM MONITOR

The American Foreign Policy Council's Review of
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February 19, 2020 **Ilan I. Berman, Matt Maldonado**

Related Categories: Democracy and Governance; Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues; Public Diplomacy and Information Operations; Science and Technology; Russia; Ukraine

SURKOV STEPS BACK FROM UKRAINE FILE

Since the start of Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky's term in office, dialogue between Moscow and Kyiv has intensified, producing tangible results such as summit meetings and prisoner swaps. According to Kremlin insiders, it has also led to the resignation of Vladislav Surkov, one of Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest advisors on Ukraine policy, who has reportedly stepped away from the portfolio citing recent "policy differences." The Kremlin has not confirmed Surkov's resignation, but experts with insight into the events have speculated as to why Surkov vacated his post. According to political scientist (and former Putin advisor) Gleb Pavlovsky, Surkov's support for insurgents in Ukraine's restive Donbas region had grown too glaring in light of improving relations between the two countries. Surkov had served as Russia's pointman for coordination with the region's separatist Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. (Bloomberg, January 25, 2020)

PREINSTALLED SMARTPHONE APPS WILL PRIORITIZE "MORAL VALUES"

July 1st, 2020 is the date from which all smartphones sold in Russia must come preinstalled with domestically produced apps such as a GPS, search engine, and antivirus, according to a new law signed by President Putin last month. The move is being branded as a way to protect the Russian tech industry from stiff western competition. The criteria for which apps will receive state sponsorship is still being worked out, but "the prioritization of spiritual and moral values" is listed among the popularity and security of the apps, according to a report by *Vedomosti*.

The cellphone requirement, moreover, is just the first stage of a larger government initiative to preinstall software on several popular electronic devices. By July of 2023, the same app requirement will apply to commercially available tablets, personal computers, and smart televisions as well. (*The Moscow Times*, January 24, 2020)

RUSSIAN MEDIA: U.S. GOVERNMENT BEHIND CORONAVIRUS

In the days and weeks following the outbreak of the new coronavirus in China, Russian mass media and news outlets such as *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and RIA Novosti have been circulating various theories revolving around the belief that the West is behind the outbreak. Different iterations of the allegation exist, ranging from the idea that the coronavirus is a U.S. bioweapon to the theory that the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation financed the virus' creation.

Russian military experts and political leaders such as Igor Nikulin (famous for claiming the United States carried out the biological attack on Sergei Skripal in Salisbury, UK) and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, the leader of Russia's Liberal Democratic Party and a member of the State Duma, have made public comments supporting such theories. Content claiming foul play by the West has thus far appeared only on Russia's inward facing domestic news outlets; foreign language media such as *Russia Today* has not carried the story. This is not the first time Russian state actors have claimed the U.S. engages in covert biological warfare. During the 1980s the KGB circulated the idea that AIDS was created in a biolab by the U.S. government, a belief that is still held by some in Russia today. (*Polygraph*, January 28, 2020)

ENCRYPTION SERVICE BLOCKED BY RUSSIAN CENSORS

Russian authorities have moved to block domestic usage of ProtonMail and ProtonVPN, popular encryption software packages that are used by journalists and bloggers to communicate and search anonymously. According to ROSKOMNADZOR, the Russian federal agency tasked with screening and censorship, ProtonMail had been used to send anonymous bomb threats all over the country, paralyzing cities such as Moscow since late last year. ProtonMail, a Swiss company, has publicly stated that it had not been contacted as part of an investigation into the bomb hoax, and has asserted that the banning of its service in Russia will only serve to put people's personal data at risk. Smartmail.com, a different privacy service, has also been shut down for similar reasons. (Reuters, January 29, 2020)